



# SUSAN MAY WARREN

 TAMING RAFF

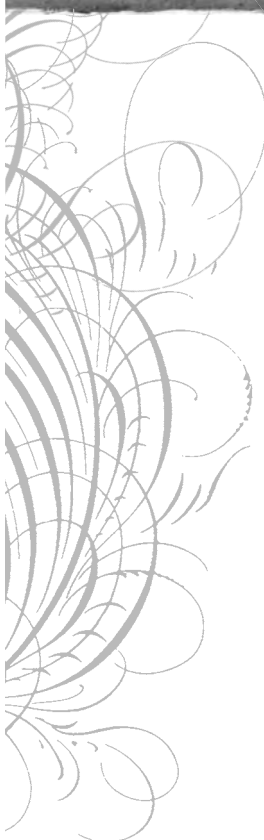


NOBLE  
LEGACY

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*Taming Rafe*

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*For Your glory, Lord*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me” (Psalm 35:1, NIV). This was the verse that my mind fed on during the season of writing *Taming Rafe*. I struggled with this story on many levels—wanting to get the bull-riding scenes right, wanting to make the story different from the typical “rich girl meets wild boy.” As I struggled, God was my contender against the voices of doubt inside me that said this book wouldn’t happen. I so richly saw Him provide resources and encouragement, wisdom and words, especially through the following people:

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Andrew Warren, my hero who, through his love, shows me how good God is to me.



*Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying  
God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you,  
giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.*

**PHILIPPIANS 2:12B-13**



## PROLOGUE

Rafe Noble, two-time world champion bull rider and current king of the gold buckle, had never met a bull that he feared. Oh, sure, he knew well the tension before a ride that buzzed his nerves and slicked his hand inside his taped-tight leather glove. But normally he shook it off the second he wound the bull rope, sticky with rosin, around the animal's chest and wedged it into his grip. Then the adrenaline, the heat, took over.

And for eight long, harrowing seconds, it was just man against beast.

In Rafe's world, man usually won.

However, as Rafe straddled the champion bull known as PeeWee—which had to be some sort of joke because the bull was the biggest, orneriest creature Rafe had ever ridden—coldness rushed through him. Something foreign and overwhelming ignited a tremble from deep within his bones.

For the first time since he was thirteen, he felt . . . terror.

Maybe it was just the residual agony of watching one of his fellow bull riders being carried out on a stretcher only minutes earlier. Maybe it was the roar of the crowd hammering at the raging headache he'd nursed most of the day. It could be the fact that he rode in pain, that he'd had to tape his hand and wear his knee brace, and the sports medicine doctor had reminded him that one more fracture to his neck would land him in a wheelchair permanently.

Or perhaps it was just the eerie feeling that hung in the air, along with the smells of animal sweat and popcorn and leather



and dirt, a surreal sense that tragedy lurked right outside the arena of spectators.

Whatever the reason, as Rafe worked his rope around his hand, through his pinkie, then pounded his fist with his other hand to lock it in place, he couldn't shake the bone-deep feeling that tonight someone would die.

Even the bullfighters, the men who distracted the bull as the riders scrambled to safety, seemed jumpy. Manuel Rodriguez caught Rafe's gaze. Dressed in a blue and red vest, black cowboy hat, long shorts, and cleats, Manuel had agility that kept him ahead of horns and made the crowd gasp. He'd saved Rafe's hide on more than a few occasions.

Manuel nodded, and despite the distance between them, the roar of the crowd, the voice of the announcer, and the advice from fellow riders as Rafe settled into his riding position, he could hear Manuel's mouthed words—*“Get 'er done.”*

Rafe returned the slightest nod and refrained from searching for Manuel's eight-year-old son, Manny, and pretty wife, Lucia, in the audience. Rafe had arranged their tickets and trip up from Mexico to see Manuel perform under the big lights of the GetRowdy Bull Riding World Championship in Las Vegas.

“You're my favorite bull rider,” little Manny had said as he handed Rafe his hat to sign at the pre-event celebrity showcase.

Behind Manny, a leggy blonde with a black T-shirt emblazoned with the GetRowdy Bull Riding logo gave Rafe a loaded smile.

Rafe winked at her and turned his attention back to Manny. “Are you going to be a bullfighter like your daddy when you get big?” he asked, signing the brim.

“Oh no. I wanna be just like you,” Manny had said, his hero-

worshiping gaze fixed on Rafe, who chuckled and plopped the hat back on Manny's head.

"Our next bull rider, two-time world champion and overall leader going into the short round . . ."

The announcer brought Rafe's attention back to the snorting animal he straddled. Clearly, his mind wasn't in the game tonight. Which probably gave credence to the voice inside. He scooted up tight against his bull rope, blew out several short breaths, and banged his protective vest with his free hand. His biceps tightened against the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt, and he pulled up his fringed black and red chaps at the knees before he set his legs astride the bull, ready to dig in with his spurs.

And right then, the fear rushed him, poured through every cell. Right behind it, words or perhaps an impression.

*Don't ride.*

What was wrong with him? Nerves, maybe. After all, his title hung on this ride.

"All the way from eastern Montana, riding the champion bull PeeWee . . .," the announcer droned on.

Some men prayed before they got on a bull. Rafe had known plenty of cowboys to shoot up prayers afterward, while stretched out on the ground as a furious animal tried to trample their brains. But not Rafe. He hadn't prayed since . . . well, God had stopped listening to him years ago. Rafe wouldn't waste his breath.

Instead, Rafe reached deep, past the fear to the grit he'd been born with, and wrapped his free hand around the smooth top rail of the metal chute.

His sister, Stefanie, never understood why he rode. Couldn't grasp the fact that sometimes it just needed to be him against

animal. That when he rode the bull for those full eight seconds, he felt, just for a fraction of time, like the king of the world. Invincible.

He'd never even tried to explain it to Nick. His big brother wouldn't have a clue what it might be like to always feel . . . less.

*Don't ride.*

The voice crept up his spine as the bull shifted beneath him. He took a deep breath, focused on the ride.

*This is for you, Mom.*

"Go." Rafe nodded.

The chute opened, and the bull lunged into the arena. Everything inside Rafe went silent. Heat seared his wrist, his arms, his legs. PeeWee writhed in fury as he landed on his forelegs.

Rafe fought for balance while the bull rocked him forward. He barely missed cracking his nose on bone, being speared. The animal bucked again, and Rafe stiffened his arm and realigned his spur position, hooking with his left spur, trying to pull himself back into position and dig himself out of a fall.

PeeWee snorted, throwing back his head.

Rafe's grip jarred, but he kept his seat. *C'mon, bull, fight me.*

He not only needed an eight-second ride but PeeWee needed to fight him hard to up his points and keep Rafe ahead of a feisty rider from Brazil on the leaderboard. The bull stretched out into the air, landing with a jerk that rattled Rafe's teeth.

The roar of the crowd filled his ears.

PeeWee's hindquarters changed direction. Rafe knew the bull had won.

Rafe grabbed with his spurs, fought to make the eight-second whistle. His bicep spasmed.

The bull bucked again. And then Rafe was off. Only not quite.

Hung up by the bull rope, the cowbell thrashing on the opposite side, Rafe flopped like a rag doll as he fought to free his hand.

The bull flipped him.

The crowd went eerily silent.

Manuel blurred past Rafe as the bull took him round and round. His shoulder burned, the muscle ripping deep inside, maybe his rotator cuff or his shoulder dislocating. Hopefully he wouldn't hit his head or snap a c-bone in his neck. He lunged again at his rope.  
*Please.*

Manuel snared it. Rafe fell free. He landed in the dirt, dazed, and threw his arms over his head. The bull's hooves exploded the dirt beside him.

*Get up!* But his wind had been snuffed out. Darkness edged his sight.

"Rafe!" He heard Manuel's voice, felt hands grabbing his vest.

Rafe looked up, past Manuel's dark expression. Everything turned black and white.

*Don't ride.*

Rafe saw the bull's hooves crashing down over him and knew fear had spoken the truth.

Tonight someone would die.



The heat slithered through Katherine Breckenridge's pores, devouring her energy and consuming the last remnants of hope that little Eva would live to see another sunrise. The child lay in a hospital bed, her breath so slight that her chest barely moved, and she'd long ago stopped sweating. Her black hair fanned over the pillow, and she looked painfully innocent and oddly at peace.

An itchy line of sweat trickled down Katherine's temple and dripped into the collar of her cotton short-sleeve shirt. It stung the burn she'd received this afternoon as she'd toured the village. Now, as dusk entered the grimy, poorly screened windows of the clinic, she longed for the touch of the wind off the Sierra Madre Mountains to the northwest, the smells of pine and oak that seemed to overtake her, even revive her as she drove into the hills earlier this morning. Something to lift the oppressive odor of death that hovered in the room.

A metal fan buzzed in the far corner, and flies landed now and again on the cotton bedsheets, turned gray and thin from decades of use. Fifteen children, all in various stages of cancer, lay motionless in their beds—if that's what they could be called. A mattress no thicker than one of Angelina's tortillas could hardly be classified as a bed.

Across from Eva's emaciated body, Katherine's housekeeper—which seemed such an inadequate label for the woman who'd practically raised her—Angelina Rivera held Eva's motionless hand to her own forehead, her lips moving in silent prayers, as if infusing life into the little girl.

Angelina had spent hours in the night lighting a candle, praying in the chapel for the lives of the children under the care of this Mercy Doctors hospital. Just as she'd prayed for years for Katherine.

The prayers of a righteous woman availeth much.

"Katherine, can you change Carlos's bed?" This from Sister Marguerite—Angelina's sister and one of the nuns who lived in the clinic, bathing and feeding children. Strong and steadfast like her sister, Marguerite didn't bother with manners and couldn't care less that Katherine came from wealth, that she had originally traveled

to Mexico for a two-day fund-raising, publicity-gathering event. Apparently she'd earned points with the nun when Katherine elected to stay with Angelina after the fund-raiser was over.

Not that she had been any great help. No, she fit in here, in a scorching and smelly Guadalajara clinic about as well as she did in Manhattan.

How she ached to be like Marguerite and Angelina. The sisters held the children as they writhed in pain and wept as the little ones slipped into eternity. Angelina had accompanied Katherine's mother, Felicia, numerous times to this Mercy Doctors clinic—the only one that the Breckenridge Foundation supported. But Katherine had never guessed that Angelina got her nursing skills from tending to the needs of these dying children. If it hadn't been for her mother leaving the Breckenridge Foundation in Katherine's not-so-capable hands, Katherine would probably still be attending NYU, getting another useless degree.

Katherine hadn't cried, but for a week now, her chest had ached, and right in the center, it burned.

She took a fresh, folded stack of bed linens and found Carlos—fourteen yet emaciated to the size of an eight-year-old—curled in the far bed. He didn't look at her as she untucked his feet. "It's okay," she said in Spanish. But how okay was it when a grown boy soiled his sheets?

Katherine rolled the bedsheet under him, tucked the clean sheet into one side, then rolled him onto it. New beds. One more thing on her list of requests from donors. She'd list them right after medicines.

She removed the soiled sheet, then tucked in the clean linen. "There you go," she said, covering him with a thin top sheet.

A single tear ran over his nose.

There went the burning again, deep and now so consuming it took her breath.

*If only I'd come sooner.* The words speared her, turning and chewing at the tender flesh of hope. She'd known the clinic was in jeopardy. Since her mother's death by car crash high in these very mountains three years ago, the organization had been on a slow slide toward extinction. Katherine simply didn't have her mother's knack for fund-raising with the upper crust. But this firsthand, painful face-to-face with the needs of the hospital felt like a punch right to her sternum. It put suffering faces to her failures.

Katherine threw the soiled sheets in the hamper and went to find Sister Marguerite, who'd disappeared into her tiny office to fill out reports.

"Yes?" the nun asked without looking up.

Katherine leaned against the door and sighed. "How is he?"

Marguerite met her eyes. "Carlos?"

Katherine nodded. Something about the boy, the way he suffered in silence, even refused to acknowledge the suffering, the cancer eating away at him . . . His pain, even more than Eva's, felt like Katherine's own.

Marguerite shook her head, then went back to writing.

"What about his parents? Shouldn't they be here?"

Marguerite put down her pen. "Carlos has no one. He showed up on our doorstep, already too far gone for us to help him."

Which meant that Carlos was a street child. Alone and fending for himself. Katherine closed her eyes. *Lord, it's too much. Too . . .*

If only she'd found a way to urge donors to dig deeper into their pockets, or if she'd managed their finances better . . . if only . . .

It had probably been these very *if onlys*, the ones that burrowed

deep and ate away hope, that had compelled her mother to pour out her life for the children in this part of the world. Their sunken, dark eyes haunted Felicia Breckenridge and drove her forward on the fund-raising path, an ambassador of goodwill, hoping to touch one more life. If anything, this trip to the other side of reality had given Katherine enough perspective to understand why her mother had spent so much time away from her as a child.

Katherine felt grimy and knew dirt streaked her face, layering her skin. Back home, her friends shelled out five hundred dollars an hour to bathe in such mud. But Katherine, like her mother, preferred to use her bank account for purposes that ministered to the soul rather than the body. If her wealth couldn't be used to help these children, then what good was it?

Still, it seemed that no amount of cash could heal Eva, resurrect her from the sagging hospital bed to play with her one-legged Barbie dolls and draw colorful pictures for supporters. Nor would it give Carlos a family, a home, a future.

Katherine shuffled down to the laundry room, where Marguerite had fixed cots for her and Angelina. She sat on the end of the cot, fatigue washing over her.

Just one life. That's all she wanted. To somehow make a difference in just one life.

Lying down and drawing her legs up, she closed her eyes. Five minutes, and then she'd . . .

"Katherine?" Angelina's voice pulled her from the tug of slumber.

Katherine woke with a shot, blinking into the darkness. Night had invaded the room, along with moaning from down the hall. Her dark hair lay plastered to her neck, having fallen out of its ponytail. "I fell asleep. I'm sorry. I—"



“Come.” Angelina held out her hand, and as Katherine had done numerous times when she was a child, she took it and followed Angelina down the hall.

In the shadowy embrace of night, Carlos lay in his bed, his breathing labored, every rise and fall of his chest accompanied by a wheeze and moan. Marguerite stood at the foot of his bed, her hand on his leg, her head bowed, her mouth moving.

Carlos’s dark eyes locked on Katherine’s. His mouth moved, but through his parched lips, no sound emerged.

Katherine looked at Angelina, who gave her a sad smile, squeezed her hand.

Katherine crouched next to Carlos, her face close to his. She pushed his hair off his forehead. Pain filled her throat, her chest, and she bit it back for his sake.

Carlos swallowed and reached out to touch her hand. “Senorita,” he said so quietly it seemed more of a breath, “gracias.”

*Thank you?* Katherine stared stupidly at him, feeling brittle. For what? She’d done nothing to really help him; change a sheet, hold a hand—what were those things? Placebos.

It wasn’t enough. Not *nearly* enough. She pressed her forehead to his hand, feeling tears begin to bubble out of the pain in her chest. “No, Carlos, it’s I who must thank—”

Angelina pressed her hand on Katherine’s shoulder. “He’s gone.”

Katherine looked into Carlos’s sightless eyes.

Angelina ran her hand over his face and closed his eyes.

Katherine sat motionless, tears dripping off her chin, a hot rage swelling through her. *Lord, please, for Eva, for Carlos . . . somehow, help me be . . . do . . . enough.*

 CHAPTER I

KATHERINE RUSSELL BRECKENRIDGE's ability to choose the right pair of shoes to wear with her seafoam green ball gown certainly wouldn't stop world hunger or cause peace in the Middle East, but tonight it might raise enough money to give a child like Eva a fighting chance for life.

At least—*please, Lord*—she hoped so.

Wrapped in a bathrobe, Katherine sat on her dressing stool in the walk-in closet of her penthouse suite and bemoaned her lack of fashion sense. Her supermodel mother, Felicia, would have instinctively known which shoes to pick.

“Should I wear the metallic snake slingbacks, the black peep-toe pumps, or the leopard thong sandals?” Katherine asked her assistant, Cari, on speakerphone.

“Wear the silver open-toe slingbacks. They're gorgeous with that dress,” Cari said.

“How about my pink horsey slippers? They're kind of cute.”

Silence at the other end told her the answer.

“I was just kidding,” Katherine said as she swept up her yoga pants and the T-shirt she’d napped in and dumped them in the hamper.

“Sure you were,” Cari said in an I-know-you tone.

Katherine sighed in defeat. Get her in a pair of heels and she suddenly felt like a bull in Tiffany’s. Why couldn’t fund-raising come easy to her—as it had for her mother? “It would have helped if my mother left me her fashion sense to go along with the Breckenridge Foundation charity events.”

Outside, the sun had half settled just beyond the Manhattan skyline, lighting the windows of surrounding buildings platinum. It flowed into her adjacent bedroom, turning the Turkish rugs to a brilliant turquoise. Katherine hadn’t had the desire to redecorate. Everything in the master bedroom, from the gold-tasseled bed linens to the silver-plated mirrors to the antique silver vases holding the daily supply of yellow roses, still bore her mother’s flair, her style.

Katherine didn’t have the foggiest idea how she might improve on that.

“She *did* leave you her fashion sense, Katherine. The only problem is, her legacy comes in a size two. And it doesn’t match your own, uh, style.”

Katherine didn’t need to glance in the mirror to confirm that she’d inherited her *father’s* style. Her preference for jeans and cowboy boots. If only he’d also given her his charisma, his never-say-die spirit that had made him a champion bull rider. But she possessed neither her father’s courage nor her mother’s glamour. Felicia Breckenridge and Bobby Russell had been America’s beloved poster couple.

So why hadn't their daughter inherited their magic? Magic she so desperately needed if she hoped to pull the Breckenridge Foundation away from the abyss of bankruptcy.

She just hoped that her grandfather and his wolfish board of directors would stay in their corners until she got through this little soiree and out into the financial clear.

"You'll be beautiful," Cari said, and her voice softened. "Put on your best Katherine Breckenridge smile, shake everyone's hand, and I promise that the five-course dinner you put together will have the donations pouring in. The board will see your efforts, forgive you for a few bad investments, and everything will be fine."

"A few bad investments?" According to Katherine's last balance sheets, her accounts had lost over five hundred thousand dollars in three months. And if Grandfather Breckenridge turned down her request to underwrite her donation to the Mercy Doctors clinic for another quarter, children like Eva might not live to see next year. "Now who's living in a fairy tale?"

"Maybe you and your life-is-but-a-dream mentality are rubbing off on me. I'm even willing to consider that a handsome prince might ride into the lobby of the Breckenridge and whisk me away to my castle, complete with my private entrance to Tiffany's and an unlimited expense account. But barring that, I believe you have a winning night planned. The weather is even cooperating. The heat wave will drive everyone inside to the air-conditioned ballroom of the Breckenridge Hotel, and they'll pay just to stay indoors." Cari's voice contained a smile. "And it won't hurt that you get to sit next to Lincoln Cash all night. I wonder what other celebrities are going to show."

At the mention of the actor's name, Katherine glanced at the issue

of *America, Now!* in her trash bin. Sadly, it hadn't contained even a word of the press release she'd sent out about tonight's event. Although she'd also invited a passel of other actors and celebrities, she banked on a confirmed appearance by Lincoln Cash to lure the press. "I don't care if I sit by him—I just want him and his gang of photographers."

"Oh, please, there isn't a woman alive who wouldn't stand on a bed of coals to sit next to Lincoln Cash."

"He's not my type, which only adds to the fact that my mother and I were nothing alike. I prefer a well-barbered, silk-suited man to a whiskered, rough-edged scoundrel who considers a wink the invitation to dinner or more. Besides, I have Bradley."

Cari sighed. "Right."

"Bradley is stable. And patient. Everything a woman could want."

"If you're a houseplant."

"Stop."

"Okay, but only if you put down the black pumps."

"How do you do that?" With a look of longing, Katherine slid the pumps back into their drawer.

"Ten years of boarding school with you."

Katherine held up the green dress and the silver sandals and fleetingly wondered if she'd even fit into any of her outfits after last week's taste test with the catering company. Even if she'd only picked at the outrageously extravagant dishes, she still felt slightly traitorous after spending the last two weeks visiting the Guadalajara clinic. Again. But seeing Eva's smiling face—miraculously pink with health—gave Katherine the incentive to nail down every detail of tonight's annual event. "I just thought it would be easier."

"Easier to fill your mother's shoes?"

Katherine lifted a shoulder, staring into the mirror, trying for the

thousandth time to see even a hint of Felicia's famous blue eyes in her own hazel ones.

"Or easier to realize that you're not her?"

"Thanks. I appreciate that show of support." Katherine laid the dress on her bed, dropped the sandals to the floor.

"So you're not your mother. You have your own style; you just don't know what it is yet. And when you get your rhythm, you'll be the wow she was."

"In the meantime, my grandfather is going to convince the board to write off the Breckenridge Foundation as a loss and swallow the entire charity into the maw of Walter Breckenridge Enterprises. I will have successfully driven my late mother's life work into the ground in the span of three years. I think that might be some kind of record."

"Tonight is going to be a success. By the way, the director of social services called again. She said something about an appointment at the Seventh Avenue children's shelter. Last time you did that, you wanted to adopt three children."

"I wasn't serious. Just . . . moved."

"I'm not saying homeless kids don't tug at my heartstrings, honey, but you gotta stop trying to adopt every charity case you meet."

A knock came at her door. "Katherine?"

Katherine said a quick good-bye to Cari and disconnected the call. "Come in, Angelina." Her voice sounded fatigued, even to herself, despite the forty-minute nap she'd just caught.

Angelina strode past her into the bedroom. "You're not ready yet? Senor Lymon is on his way up."

Oh, perfect. Bradley hated being late.

The early evening sun poured through the French doors at the far end of her dressing room, yet heat shimmered in the twilight and

reflected off the windows of Trump Tower across the street. From the balcony off her bedroom, Central Park, with its lakes and cool breezes, beckoned like a favorite novel, someplace to lose herself.

Maybe Cari was right. Tonight would be perfect. She had plotted every detail. All the same, it would be nice if the Almighty could send her a memo or something to assure her that she was on the right track. *Lord, please make this night successful.*

It seemed that ever since Katherine had returned from her first trip to Mexico six months ago, she'd had disaster touch every part of her life, from her seemingly bad accounting to her strained relationship with her grandfather to her health. It just wasn't natural to be so tired all the time, regardless of how many herbal remedies Angelina concocted, how many vitamins Cari made her swallow, and how many doctors Bradley made her visit. And now, another of her weekly migraines edged in on her.

Angelina led her to the dressing table in her bathroom and made her sit as she helped her style her hair. As usual, Angelina hummed from her repertoire of hymns, songs that Katherine still equated with warm, solid arms and unconditional comfort.

Angelina was the closest thing Katherine had to a real mother. The kind who'd known of her secret nest in the closet, with her horse posters, her Flicka books. The kind who woke her from her nightmares and fed her hot chocolate for breakfast. The kind who had prayed her through her teenage confusion and helped her find her own spiritual footing, beyond her Catholic boarding school. If it weren't for Angelina, Katherine might have turned out just like her grandfather, someone resembling the ice sculpture down in the ballroom. Sometimes she wondered why he even raised her. Maybe because her mother had been so busy—

“Katherine?”

She held her bathrobe at the neck. “Come in.”

The bedroom door opened. “Hey there, beautiful.” Bradley poked his head into the room. Concern filled his brown eyes. “Are you feeling okay?”

She managed a nod. “I’ll be out in a moment. Make yourself at home.”

“I have a quick meeting to attend. I’ll meet you downstairs.” Bradley gave a slight frown, then glanced at Angelina. “Do your best work, Senora. I have a special evening planned.” He winked at Katherine and closed the door behind him.

Angelina’s eyes shone, evidence she’d fallen under Bradley’s spell. With his highlighted blond hair that he wore in a slightly mussed style and his lean, gym-toned physique, Bradley exuded a charm that made Katherine forget everything but the silly smile on her face and the way he put his hand on the small of her back.

*A special evening.* Funny, she had waited for such a special evening all her life, but now she only felt a crimp in her stomach.

It had to be nerves. Just because Grandfather Breckenridge had introduced them didn’t mean that successful attorney Bradley Lymon wasn’t the man of her dreams. Katherine should stop trying to figure out why Bradley wanted her in his life, give up trying to make a difference in the world, and let herself relax.

She sat up straight on the velvet stool and stared into the tall, silver-plated mirror as Angelina put her hair up, letting the wisps curl down over her ears.

“Your mama would have been so proud,” Angelina said, bringing her face close to Katherine’s.

Katherine smiled, patting Angelina’s hand. “Gracias.” But she



knew the truth. Angelina saw the girl she'd raised, the Breckenridge princess. However, next to Katherine's willowy blonde mother, Katherine had been . . . well, more like a buffalo.

Maybe she resembled her father, Bobby, the man who'd died riding bulls when Katherine was a child. She had a faded color photograph of them together. Katherine was five and wearing red cowboy boots and a grin. Another photo displayed Bobby's wide smile, the way he lazily hung his hand from his giant gold championship buckle, the gleam in his dark brown eyes.

Felicia never, not even once, spoke of the man who'd died in her arms. And she'd refused to let Katherine speak of him either. Even her father's obituary had been sketchy. "Complications from a bull-riding fall" could mean anything in her curious mind.

And the fact that his death happened months after said fall raised even more questions.

Someday, Katherine vowed, she'd have answers.

Katherine put on a pair of teardrop diamond earrings, a recent present from Bradley, then added a matching necklace—last Christmas's gift, an extravagant gesture two weeks into their courtship. She slipped on the ball gown, and it pinched at the waist as she zipped it up. Thankfully, the tasting spree hadn't left its ravages.

"It's time," Angelina said as she hung up Katherine's robe.

Katherine dug out her most recent migraine prescription, quickly swallowed two capsules, and massaged her temples.

If people didn't look too closely, they'd never notice the extra makeup covering the circles under her eyes or the way her smile didn't quite dazzle. She grabbed her clutch, hoping that she could remember State Representative George Brennan's newest wife's name.

As Katherine let herself out of her suite and into the elevator, she felt the effects of the painkiller start to hit, the bludgeoning in her brain subside. With it came a surreal calm, the sense that she wasn't really connected to this moment but was somewhere else. Maybe on Grandfather's yacht, smelling the briny surf. Or better yet, that place in her childhood dreams where she found herself more and more lately—lost in Montana, riding horseback, the wind at her back, the smell of wildflowers beckoning her to freedom.

But that serene life was about as likely to happen as a longhorn steer charging through the lobby of the Breckenridge Hotel and taking a bath in the center fountain.

The picture made her smile.

*Please, Lord, make this night successful. For Eva. For kids like Carlos.*

The elevator doors opened, and she inclined her head to the applause that greeted her from her assembled guests in the lobby. Bradley stepped forward and took her hand, and she grasped it, grateful. Possibly even happy. *Definitely* happy. Bradley looked resplendent in his tuxedo as he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm.

Yes, tonight had the makings of the perfect evening.



John Kincaid stared at the blinking light of his answering machine and knew that in two weeks life as he knew it would end. He pushed Play. The voice detailed the time and place everything would change, and a cold sweat trickled down his spine.

He'd always anticipated this day. Especially with the string of good fortune he'd experienced over the past few years. However, with the good came the compromises, the secrets.

John sat down in his leather chair and drummed his fingers on the glass-topped desk, staring at the picture of his father, the late John Senior.

*"You'll always be a rancher, Son. Get that through your head."*

But John refused to end up like his father.

He smiled and slowly lowered the picture facedown. Then he opened the desk drawer and pulled out a small velvet box. Opening it, he stared a long time at the simple brilliant-cut solitaire diamond in a white gold setting. He'd had it for years, just tucked away in the drawer, waiting for the right words. For a man whose life revolved around words, the task seemed idiotically impossible. *Will you marry me?* Simple enough, but the first and only time he'd asked, Lolly had shaken her head and run off crying.

If that didn't scream a big no, he didn't know what did. Since then, she hadn't breathed a clue as to why. Being a Montana man, a rancher, and patient at heart, John didn't push. Obviously, he'd have to find a different set of words if he hoped for a yes.

John took out the ring and slipped it over his pinkie, holding it in the light and imagining what it might look like on Lolly's long, elegant ring finger. He closed his eyes and let her image fill his thoughts—her playful smile, the way her dishwater blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, the twinkle in her hazel eyes. For all Lolly's charm and flirtation, she still seemed a mystery to him. As if her life had started the day she arrived in Phillips, a twenty-year-old wanderer.

He'd watched her that day from his pickup in the feed store parking lot, the wind catching her hair, dust kicking up around her blue jeans, her hands in her back pockets as she stared at the vacant lot on the corner. Right then, something happened inside

his chest. Not a lightning bolt zinging him with love at first sight but a soft and breathtaking peace that someday, if he bided his time, she'd be his wife.

Maybe this time when he asked, she'd say yes. *Please, God.*

John swallowed back the rush of too many emotions and closed the box. It felt small and soft in his work-worn hand. Sort of like his dreams.

But the blinking light on the machine told him that some dreams came true. And when they did, nothing would ever be the same again.



Sitting in his pickup, staring at himself—all twenty feet of glowing hot neon in the center of Times Square—Rafe Noble realized what a fake he'd become. The image shone for thirty seconds, then flipped to an advertisement of *America, Now!* magazine, on which Rafe's face graced this month's cover.

They'd airbrushed the growl right off of him, made him look downright tame. But Rafe knew the truth. Inside that GQ image of a man who wrangled two-thousand-pound beasts for a living was a rough-edged, broken cowboy just trying to keep up with his press. He'd been living for the last six months on the notion that if he rode hard enough, played fast enough, even risked enough, he could drown out the howl inside and fool everyone into thinking he was fine.

Even himself.

But no matter how many women, bulls, cars, or even occasional shots of Jack Daniels filled his life, he could still hear Manuel Rodriguez's low moan of pain as he lay dying in the dirt.

Manuel hadn't even lasted long enough for the other bullfighters to corral PeeWee, the killer bull, and send the medics out with a stretcher. By the time they took him away, Manuel's blood covered Rafe's hands, his chaps, his soul.

He knew he'd never, ever be fine again.

Rafe ran a hand through his dark, unruly hair and stared at himself in the rearview mirror. He needed a shave. And if the guy behind him didn't lay off his horn, he might just get out and—

The light changed, and he surged forward into traffic on Forty-second Street. Heat slithered into the cab of his 1984 Ford pickup, the air conditioner barely able to stay ahead of the furnace outside. It was the heat wave of the century in New York City, and he'd agreed to appear at some hoity-toity charity event.

How he hated this town and the smells of grilling beef from the gyro stands, cigarette smoke, trash fermenting in the piles of black bags on the sidewalk, bus exhaust fouling the air. He hated the sounds of brakes squealing, cabbies arguing for space, the cheeps of pigeons fighting for crumbs. The few times he'd been here, he cut his trip short, needing open spaces like the rest of the city needed air-conditioning.

He cut a left at the next light, then slammed on his brakes before he plowed over a couple of fast-walking suits arguing into their BlackBerries.

Rafe took a deep breath and wrapped his hands around the steering wheel. The truck still smelled of hay and dust, despite the fact that it hadn't been on Manuel's farm since Rafe had traded it for his late-model Silverado with Manuel's widow, Lucia. She needed something dependable. He'd spent a month there after the funeral, helping Manny Jr. cope with his father's death. At least

Manuel had lived long enough to see his son's leukemia go into remission. Trading the truck felt like the least Rafe could do, especially if he hoped to purge from his mind the haunted look in Manny Jr.'s eyes.

*"I know that you'll be the man I taught you to be. A Noble man."*

Rafe felt so far from his mother's prophecies that it made the hollow place inside him throb. He found solace only in the fact that she hadn't lived to be disappointed.

Fatigue put a rasp into his voice, betraying the way he'd spent the better half of the night remembering the premonition he'd had the night Manuel had died. He should have forfeited his ride, but he'd wanted the prize—again—the proof that he was the best. Apparently, it was something he'd never prove to anyone, not his sister and brother and especially not himself.

The light changed, and he drove past Radio City Music Hall, hoping he was headed in the right direction. But he'd rather be dragged behind a herd of rampaging Angus before he'd ask for directions.

For a month or so after Manuel's death, he'd entertained the idea of going home, of pitching in at the ranch and investing in the life that the rest of his family loved. But a trip home to his brother's wedding fixed that. One look at Nick's beautiful life—his wife, Piper, who obviously adored him, not to mention his dreams to resurrect and rebuild the Silver Buckle—and Rafe knew he could never return. Especially now that Nick had claimed his throne.

It was quite possible Rafe had never belonged in the kingdom, anyway.

But Rafe didn't belong in the bull-riding arena anymore either. Deep in his gut, he knew that he'd killed Manuel. No, not directly

perhaps, but he'd endorsed Manuel's abilities to GetRowdy, encouraged him to be a bullfighter, and practically pushed him under PeeWee's hooves. Rafe had been trying to be a friend, but in the end, he killed the best one he'd ever had. Right in front of his son's eyes.

The grief pushed Rafe out of bed every night, made him stare at the bright lights of whatever city he happened to be touring and wish that he'd been awake enough to wrestle Manuel out of the way.

He slammed his brakes, stifling a blue word as a taxi driver cut him off. He'd never been the swearing type, but a lot had changed in six months.

He'd also never been the whiskey type, but this morning he'd tossed an empty pint in the trash. Then he'd tried to ease his headache with four aspirin and a beer. Only that hadn't helped in the least. Despite an entire pot of coffee and another beer, he felt soggy and cranky at best. Some hero.

Spotting an opening in traffic, Rafe cut into the clear lane. He'd never driven in Manhattan before, and the traffic irked him. Not to mention the double takes by other drivers at the two long horns attached to the front of his truck's hood. So he was from out of town. He—or at least Manuel—had worked hard for this truck. And he'd like to see any one of these people go head-to-head with a one-ton killer.

He barely missed a red light and sped through to honks and the screech of tires. He looked up at the sign and cut a right on Fifty-seventh Street. The next light was yellow—or *pink*, the reckless inner voice taunted. As he came up to it and the traffic cleared the intersection, something inside Rafe snapped.

Maybe it was the concoction of beer and coffee playing with his courage, maybe the aspirin deadening the pain. Maybe it was Nick's return to the Silver Buckle to take over the family ranch. Probably it was little Manny, staring at him in the rearview mirror as Rafe had driven off in his daddy's truck.

But *something* grabbed ahold of Rafe. With a growl he punched the gas to the floor and hung a left. This late in the day, pedestrians clogged the street corners, but prudence kept them from streaming out into the crosswalk. He heard screams, but he didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

Even when he'd turned the wrong way on the one-way Fifth Avenue.

Rafe stifled another blue word and dodged a cabbie, who switched lanes for him. Another car plowed into a hot dog vendor on the side of the street. Horns chased him as he searched for escape.

Then he saw two grade-schoolers crossing the street, laughing as they ate ice cream cones. They were coming right toward him.

Rafe slammed his brakes, turning the wheel left. A trash can rocketed into the air as he blasted through a plaza, scattering pigeons, loungers. He bumped toward a green canopied entryway of a tall building. Bellboys leaped for safety.

Rafe aimed for the brakes but missed. The pickup hurtled through the side glass door, and glass waterfalled over his truck. Rafe threw an arm over his head, ducking, as the truck bounced through the lobby. He cranked the wheel, then slammed his brakes.

The truck careened down the stairs that circled a two-tiered fountain.

Adrenaline, hot and too familiar, rushed his veins. In that moment, he knew he'd escaped it. The pain. The grief. The howl inside.



The truck dead-ended at the fountain, toppling the sculptured tiers, the cherubs with their pitchers of water, and scattering the pennies cast in hope.

As pain exploded in his knee, his shoulder, his head, something new filled the vacuum left behind.

Despair.

## ✎ A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR ✎

I'm the first to declare that I am incredibly blessed to be allowed to write books. I love to write, to see the story unfold, to get to know my characters and see how God works out His plan for their lives. For me, writing a story is so much about a journey and seeing God provide each step of the way. Every book tests my faith, because when I sit down and stare at a blank screen, I have to trust that even when I don't have words, God does. Every book also brings me deep joy, because at the end I see how God has worked it out beyond what I can ask or imagine. It is a humbling thing to see God at work in your life, in the process, and in the end product and know that He has done this for His good pleasure and for my joy. To paraphrase Kat, it is no small thing to have the Creator of the universe working *in* you and *through* you to touch others. It takes my breath away.

This was an ambitious book for me—the different story lines, the book-within-a-book idea that I always wanted to try. I even had a song in the back of my mind that I wanted to write.

I started this story with an idea—that often we don't see the effect we have on others, and yet, as Christians, if we surrender to God and His plan, He uses everything we say and do for His purposes. More than that, everything we do—whether it's raising money for charity, riding bulls, or even just making our family dinner—can be used by Him for good. This thought has given me great peace over the years, regardless of where I find myself—in Russia, living in a high-rise and planting churches, or in Minnesota, tucked in the

north woods, writing books. I wanted Kat to see that God had made her uniquely Kat and that she only had to be true to herself and let God work through that person to touch the world around her.

Of course, I didn't have to look too far to find Kat. I was a lot like her growing up—had a horse on springs in my basement, a turquoise cowgirl suit, and bright red boots. I ate up shows like *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* and dreamed of having my own horse named SunDancer or Hornet. But I grew up in the suburbs (no horse in sight) and loved letting out my “inner Kitty” for this story!

I was also fascinated with the world of bull riding. I was channel surfing one day and landed on a Professional Bull Riders event. It sucked me in with the danger, the bravado, the thrills, and the wrecks, and I wondered about the kind of man who rode bulls and what God could do with him if he gave his talents to Him. Many of the bull riders I researched are Christians, and for them, riding is a way to praise the Lord, just like writing is for me.

My favorite part of the book, however, was John and Lolly's story. I loved weaving their backstory throughout the book *Unshackled* and showing the different sides of love, including the biggest part, in my opinion: commitment. I loved setting Lolly free from her shackles and helping her see how John had been her hero all along.

Thank you for journeying back to Phillips with me, for reading Rafe's story. I hope you'll join me for *Finding Stefanie*, book three in the Noble Legacy. Meanwhile, I pray that you see God working in your life and through your life to touch people around you. And I pray that it takes your breath away.

In His grace,  
*Susan May Warren*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SUSAN MAY WARREN recently returned home after serving eight years with her husband and four children as missionaries in Khabarovsk, Far East Russia. Now writing full-time as her husband runs a lodge on Lake Superior in northern Minnesota, she and her family enjoy hiking and canoeing and being involved in their local church.

Susan holds a BA in mass communications from the University of Minnesota and is a multipublished author of novellas and novels with Tyndale, including *Happily Ever After*, the American Christian Romance Writers' 2003 Book of the Year and a 2003 Christy Award finalist. Other books in the series include *Tying the Knot* and *The Perfect Match*, the 2004 American Christian Fiction Writers' Book of the Year. *Flee the Night*, *Escape to Morning*, and *Expect the Sunrise* comprise her romantic-adventure, search-and-rescue series.

*Taming Rafe* is the sequel to *Reclaiming Nick* and the second book in Susan's new romantic series.

Susan invites you to visit her Web site at

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