



## Lone Star Christmas (McCabe Multiples)

*By Cathy Gillen Thacker*

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A TEXAS CHRISTMAS...

FAMILY STYLE!

Callie McCabe-Grimes has one thing on her holiday wish list: to make this the best Christmas ever for her little boy. Without including Nash Echols, whose team of lumberjack cowboys is creating a Texas-size racket at the Christmas tree farm next door! But she has no defense against two determined males when her son decides Nash is the extra-special present he wants from Santa.

Just the sight of the beautiful widow who bought the sprawling spread east of his puts Nash in the yuletide spirit. Callie and the toddler in the tyke-size cowboy hat fill his head with visions of the three of them together under one roof. That is, if Callie can let go of her past and picture a future with her one and only Lone Star cowboy!

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Cathy Gillen Thacker is a popular Harlequin author of over one hundred novels. Married and a mother of three, she and her husband resided in Texas for eighteen years, and now make their home in North Carolina. Her mysteries, romantic comedies, and family stories have made numerous appearances on bestseller lists, but her best reward is knowing one of her books made someone's day a little brighter.

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Nash Echols dropped a fresh-cut Christmas tree onto the bed of a flatbed truck. Watched, as a luxuriously outfitted red SUV tore through the late November gloom and slammed to an abrupt stop on the old logging trail.

"Well, here comes trouble," he murmured, when the driver door opened and two equally fancy peacock-blue boots hit the running board, then the ground.

His glance moved upward, taking in every elegant inch of the cowgirl marching toward him. He guessed the sassy spitfire to be in her early thirties, like him. She glared while she moved, her hands clapped over her ears to shut out the concurrent whine of a dozen power saws.

Nash lifted a leather-gloved hand.

One by one his crew stopped, until the Texas mountainside was eerily quiet, and only the smell of fresh-cut pine hung in the air. And still the determined woman advanced, chin-length dark brown curls framing her even lovelier face.

He eased off his hard hat and ear protectors.

Indignant color highlighting her delicately sculpted cheeks, she stopped just short of him and propped her hands on her slender denim-clad hips. "You're killing me, using all those chain saws at once!" Her aqua-blue eyes narrowed. "You know that, don't you?"

Actually, Nash hadn't. And given the fact his crew had only been at this a few hours...

Her chin lifted another notch. *"You have to stop!"*

At that, he couldn't help but laugh. It was one thing for this little lady to pay him an unannounced visit, another for her to try to shut him down. "Says who?" he challenged right back.

She angled her thumb at her sternum, unwittingly drawing his glance to her full, luscious breasts beneath the fitted red velvet western shirt, visible beneath her open wool coat. "Says me!"

He took in the hefty diamond engagement and wedding rings glinting on her left hand, squinted and asked in a way he knew would rankle, "Just out of curiosity, ma'am, does your *husband* know what you're up to?"

For a moment, his uninvited visitor seemed caught off guard. Perplexed, almost. Then she stiffened and squared her shoulders, even more militantly. "For your information, cowboy, I don't need 'permission' from anyone."

Amused, he looked her over slowly, head to toe. "Then your husband wouldn't *mind* you creating a ruckus?"

Another long, thoughtful pause. Followed by a glimmer of inscrutable emotion in her eyes. "No," she said finally. And without another word, left it at that.

Which meant what? he wondered. Her husband was used to her temperamental ways? Or was just so weak he had no say? Her cagey expression gave no clue. Nash knew one thing, however. If she were *his* woman he wouldn't want her out here, stirring up trouble with a group of cattle and horse wranglers temporarily turned lumberjacks. "And you are?"

"Callie McCabe-Grimes."

Of course she was from one of the most famous and powerful clans in the Lone Star State. He should have figured that out from the moment she'd barged onto his property.

Nash indicated the stacks of freshly cut Christmas trees around them, aware the last thing he needed in his life was another person not into celebrating the holidays. "Sure that's not Grinch?"

Her thick lashes narrowed. "Ha, ha." She blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm your neighbor, to the east."

*Ah, yes.* Nash nodded. "The owner of the Heart of Texas Ranch and Corporate Retreat."

He'd heard that the hot-shot marketing wiz had apparently decided to stop helping everyone else get rich and go into business for herself. And while Nash respected the latter, he detested dealing with the diva-offspring of famous Texas families. Especially those who felt that, by virtue of their name and connections, they should automatically rule whatever roost they found themselves inhabiting.

"Well, then," Callie huffed, "if you know that, then you also know that my business is located in the valley between Sanders Mountain and Echols Mountain."

Lifting a brow, Nash took in the pink color staining her pretty face and the mutinous twist of her soft, voluptuous lips. "So?"

"So—" she waved at the dozen chain saw-wielding cowboys behind him, and the other six wrapping up recently shorn holiday trees "—all that racket you are making is carrying over onto my property!"

Nash squinted at the searing emotion in her eyes. This conversation was getting stranger all the time. "What did you expect when you set up shop next to a lumber operation?"

"There was no lumber operation when I purchased the property six months ago!"

Nash supposed that was true enough. He shrugged. "Well, there is now."

Panic warred with the fury on her face. "Since when?"

"Since I inherited the property from my great-great-uncle two months ago."

Callie sobered. "I'm sorry to hear about Mr. Echols's passing."

Nash studied her, pushing aside his own lingering grief. "You knew my uncle Ralph?"

"No," she admitted kindly. "I never had the pleasure."

"But if he was anything like me...?" Nash couldn't resist goading.

The stubborn look was back. Callie folded her arms in front of her in a way that delectably plumped up her breasts. "Let's hope he wasn't."

Nash tore his gaze from the inviting softness. Unable to resist teasing her a little more, however, he grinned. "Hasn't anyone ever told you it's the season to be jolly?"

Callie sighed in exasperation and shoved her hands through her chocolate-brown curls. "First of all, cowboy, it's not even Thanksgiving yet."

Yet, for him and his business, anyway, time was a wastin'. "It will be three days from now."

Callie threw up her palms in frustration. "Three days in which I will *lose my mind* if this racket keeps up."

No doubt about that. After all, from what he'd witnessed thus far, she did seem a little high-strung. He shifted his gaze to the pouting ripeness of her lips. Damned if he wasn't longing to kiss her, here and now, even though he knew as a married woman she was strictly off-limits.

Slowly, he let out a breath and returned his thoughts to the murky business at hand.

"And what would you have me do about it?" he asked grimly.

"I don't know." She paused to bite her lip, then asked, "Use one chain saw at a time?"

This time, Nash wasn't the only one who laughed.

When the ruckus from the men standing behind him quieted down, he winked at her and said glibly, "I'll think about it."

She stamped closer, not stopping until she was just inches away from him. "I want you to do a lot more than think about it, cowpoke!"

Nash took exception to her tone.

Her attitude.

Hell, just about everything about her.

His own temper rising, he schooled her quietly. "My name is Nash. Or Mr. Echols to you. And if that's all..."

Before he even had one ear covered up again, she planted her hand in the middle of his chest. Warmth spread instantly from beneath her delicate palm. Pooling in his chest, sliding ever downward, past his waist, to the place he least wanted to feel a rising pulse.

"Hold on there a minute, cowboy!" she declared. "I'm not done!"

Heart pounding, Nash plucked her hand from his chest like some odious piece of trash. "Too bad, little lady. Because I am."

She sniffed indignantly. "You can't just start up something like this without considering how it's going to affect everyone around you!"

Nash smiled. "Seems like—in your view anyway—I already have." He put the sound guards back on his head, then the hard hat, and gave his men the signal to resume.

She propped both hands on her hips. And this time she did stomp her pretty little foot as the whine of power saws echoed in the cool late November air.

Nash couldn't hear her muffled words of outrage, but he sure could see Callie McCabe-Grimes mouthing *something* as she glared at him, slapped her palms over her ears and spun on her heel. Her hips swaying provocatively, long luscious legs eating up the ground, she marched back to her truck and climbed into the cab. Then she extended her arm out the window, looked him right in the eye and offered him a surprisingly unladylike gesture before turning her pickup around and peeling away.

He stood there a moment, chuckling at her moxie. It was a good thing their personalities mixed about as well as oil and water, he thought, watching the dust fly in her wake. Otherwise a woman that beautiful and spirited could easily waylay him. And a distraction like that was something he did not need.

Especially at this time of year.

"There must be *something* I can do to stop that big buffoon!" Callie complained to her sister Lily over Skype, as soon as she got back to the ranch.

With the cool expertise of an accomplished attorney, Lily McCabe rocked back in her desk chair, at her Lara-mie, Texas, law office, and listened intently.

Doing her best to calm her racing pulse, Callie persisted. "Nash Echols has got to be violating some noise regulation—or something with all that racket!"

Lily shook her head. "First of all, there are no noise ordinances in rural areas."

Callie bit down on an oath. It was bad enough that her next-door neighbor was incredibly annoying, but at six foot two, with a lumberjack's powerful build, shaggy wavy black hair and slate-gray eyes, he was also handsome enough to grace an outdoor-living magazine cover. Not that his rugged good looks would help him where she was concerned.

"There are air rights," her sister continued practically. "But those belong to whoever is renting or residing on the property on which any noise is made. Which means any noise Nash Echols creates on his land is well within his rights."

Callie didn't care if Nash made himself deaf. It was her son—who luckily was still at nursery school—and the retreat clients set to start arriving the following week that she was worried about. Thankfully, though, at the moment she was the only one on her ranch, witnessing the ruckus.

"But his noise is coming over to my property! I mean, it's horrible." She opened up the window next to the phone, and just like before, the constant whine of multiple power saws reverberated in the brisk November air. She shut it again and turned back to the computer screen on her desk. "See what I mean?"

Lily nodded. "Just hearing it through the walls of your ranch house is enough to give me a headache—and I'm two hundred miles away! I can only imagine what it sounds like from your end."

"Exactly!"

Her sister picked up a pen and turned it end-over-end. "But you can't go to court on account of someone giving you a headache, Callie. Or the justice system would be jam-packed with nuisance cases."

Reluctantly, she supposed that was true.

Lily's demeanor gentled even more. "You want my honest advice, sis?"

Callie did her best to relax. Not easy, when she was still seeing—in her mind's eye, anyway—the smug expression on Nash Echols's blatantly handsome face. Still feeling the taut, warm muscles beneath the palm she had recklessly planted on his chest...

Callie swallowed, tamping down the whisper of long suppressed desire. She was romantically unattached now, and planned to stay that way.

"That is why I called you," she said quietly. Because, of all five of her sisters, Lily was always the quickest to cut to the chase with a solution.

"Go back. Apologize to the man. Tell him you temporarily lost your mind and want to work out an amicable solution, so that both your businesses can continue to operate."

The idea of groveling in front of the way-too-confident man next door rankled. Worse, just the thought of seeing him again made her pulse race.

Taking all that into account, Callie uttered a morose sigh and rubbed at the tense muscles in her forehead. "He's not going to go for it."

Frowning at her sister's defeatist attitude, Lily warned, "You better hope he does, because otherwise you're in a heap of trouble. In the holiday season, no less."

Nash had just gotten out of the shower when he heard a vehicle in the driveway. He pulled on a pair of jeans and, still rubbing a towel through his hair, walked barefoot to the front hall. The bell rang. Nash looped the towel around his neck, opened the heavy wood door and got his second surprise of the day.

On the other side of the portal was Callie McCabe-Grimes. She had a big wicker basket in one hand, and a handsome little toddler, clad in a tyke-size cowboy getup, in the other.

Although she was a married woman—with a kid, no less—and should be used to the sight of a partially disrobed man, she appeared taken aback by the sight of him. So much so that when she silently took in his bare chest and damp hair, she looked as if she wanted to bolt, but didn't.

Tightening her grip on the little boy's hand, and plastering a smile as big as Texas on her face, she said, "I'm here to apologize."

That *was* news.

Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes to his, and kept them there. "I'm afraid we got off on the wrong foot." No joke.

"Hence, my son, Brian—" she indicated the curly-haired little boy beside her with a tilt of her head "—and I would like to make amends and start over."

If anyone had accompanied Callie for the mea culpa, Nash would have expected it to be her husband. But then, maybe Mr. Grimes didn't know what his little woman had been up to.

Nor did her son.

Unable to resist making things at least a little difficult for the Texas belle, Nash ran a hand across his jaw and pointed out, "*Brian* doesn't owe me an apology."

Callie flushed, obviously recalling her diva-like exit from his property. "Yes, well, as I said...I forgot my manners momentarily. And I do feel terrible about that."

She felt terrible about something—that was clear. Exactly what that was, he wasn't entirely sure.

Still, he had been raised with manners, too, and since his new neighbor had taken what had to be a difficult first step toward reconciliation, he felt obligated to be cordial, as well.

He stepped aside, suddenly concerned about the drop in temperature. It was just above freezing now. "Would you like to come in? It's pretty cold outside for your little one."

"Yes, thank you. That would be nice." Ushering his guests inside and shutting the door behind them, he realized that the foyer was a little chilly compared to the warmth of the rest of the rustically outfitted log-cabin-style ranch house. But that didn't seem to bother Cal-lie or her son.

She glanced around, taking in the soaring cathedral ceiling and large fieldstone fireplace in the adjacent living room. Her eyes fell on the leather furniture and earth-toned Southwestern rugs.

While his great-uncle Ralph had been alive, the Echols Mountain Ranch house had definitely been a man's domain. Nash hadn't changed much since he had arrived.

Nor did he intend to do so in the future.

Aware the domain seemed all the more masculine with someone as feminine as Callie in it, he asked casually, "How old is your son?"



"Two and a half."

Nash had never been one to gush over kids, but there was something about this little guy—maybe it was his resemblance to his mama?—that drew him in. He smiled, inclining his head at the tyke. "Cute."

"Thanks," Callie murmured. And this time her smile appeared genuine.

Looking ready to make himself at home, Brian took off his Stetson and attempted to fit it over the newel on the staircase. It fell to the floor instead. He reached for it, tried again and missed by an even wider margin. Nash leaned down. "Let me help you, little fella."

"No," Brian retorted with the stubbornness he evidently got from his gorgeous, dark-haired mama. *"I do."* Nash lifted his hands and stepped back. Seeming torn between correcting her son and getting on with it, Callie blew out a breath and handed Nash the basket. "Inside you'll find our welcome-to-the-neighborhood dinner. Homemade Texas chili and cornbread, fruit compote and chocolate cake."

Nash couldn't recall the last time he'd had a hot, home-cooked meal. Most of his meals were either from a restaurant or the freezer section of the local supermarket. "Seriously?"

## **Users Review**

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