



Christmas Cowboy Duet (Forever, Texas Book 12)

By Marie Ferrarella



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An Entertainment Weekly Top 10 Romance Author

FOREVER'S COUNTRY BOY

His heroic rescue of a stranger caught in a flash flood just changed Liam Murphy's life—big-time. With Whitney Marlowe's help, the laid-back country-and-western singer could be a star. Only now, with the dynamic LA talent scout stranded in his Texas town, during the holidays no less, Liam has another dream: a permanent duet!

The long, lean cowboy with the soulful eyes makes the most beautiful music Whitney has ever heard. Fate brought her to Forever, and the town embraced her, inviting her to help decorate the community's Christmas tree. Though reluctant to return home, she isn't leaving without her newest discovery. It's dangerous mixing business and pleasure! Together, can she and Liam find their forever after?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

This USA TODAY bestselling and RITA ® Award-winning author has written more than two hundred books for Harlequin Books and Silhouette Books, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

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The deluge seemed to come out of nowhere.

On his way back to town after a better-than-average rehearsal session with the band he'd helped put together, Liam and the Forever Band, Liam Murphy immediately made his way to high ground at the first sign of a serious rainfall.

Traveling alone out here, the youngest of the Murphy brothers was taking no chances—just in case. Flash floods didn't occur often around here, but they *did* occur and "better safe than sorry" had been a phrase that had been drummed into his head by his older brother Brett from the time he and his other brother Finn had been knee-high to a grasshopper.

As it turned out, Liam had made it to high ground just in time. Rain fell with a vengeance, as if the very sky had been slashed open. As he watched in awed fascination, in less than ten minutes, the onslaught of rain turned the basin below from a virtual dust bowl to a veritable swimming pool—one filled with swirling waters.

More like a whirlpool, Liam silently amended, because the waters were sweeping so angrily over the terrain, mimicking the turbulent waters in a Jacuzzi.

Liam glanced at the clock on his dashboard. Depending on when this was going to let up, he was either going to be late, or *very* late. This, after he'd promised Brett he'd be in to work early. He was due at Murphy's, Forever's only saloon. Fortunately, it belonged to his brothers and him, but Brett was still not going to be happy about this turn of events.

Liam took out his phone, automatically glancing at the upper left-hand corner to see if there were any bars available.

There were.

"Not bad," he murmured to himself when he saw the three small bars. "Service must be improving," he noted with some relief.

There'd been a time, not all that long ago, when no bars were the norm. A few short years ago, the region around Forever, for all intents and purposes, was a dead zone. But progress could only be held off for so long. Civilization had gotten a foothold in the town, though it had to be all but dragged in, kicking and screaming. Even now, on occasion, the strength of the signal was touch and go.

Liam pressed the appropriate buttons. It took a very long minute before the call connected and he could hear

the line on the other end ringing. He silently began to count off the number of times the other phone rang.

He was up to four—one more and it went to voice mail—when he heard the cell phone being picked up.

There was an almost deafening crackle and then he heard, "Murphy's."

The deep, baritone voice could only belong to Brett, the oldest Murphy brother, the one who had been responsible for keeping him and Finn from becoming wards of the state when their uncle died a mere eighteen months after both their parents had passed on. Brett had done it at great personal cost, but that was something he and Finn had only found out about years after the fact.

"Brett? It's Liam. Looks like I'm going to be late for my shift," he told his brother. The rain was beating against the rolled-up windows of his truck with a vengeance as if determined to gain access. All that was missing was a big, bad wolf ranting about huffing and puffing.

"Don't tell me, you got caught in this storm."

Liam could hear the concern in his brother's voice—not that Brett would say as much. But it was understood. "Okay, I won't tell you."

He heard Brett sigh. "I always knew you didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain. Were you at least smart enough to get to high ground?"

"Yes, big brother, the truck and I are on high ground." Even as he said the words, his windows stopped rattling and the rain stopped coming down in buckets. He looked up through the front windshield. It seemed to have stopped coming down at all. "Matter of fact," he said, pausing for a moment as he rolled down the driver's-side window and stuck his hand out, palm up, "I think it just stopped raining."

It never ceased to amaze him just how fast rain seemed to turn itself on and then off again in this part of the country.

"I'd still give it a little time," Brett warned. "In case it starts up again. I'd rather have you late than dead."

Liam laughed shortly. "And on that heartwarming note, I think I'm going to end this call. See you later," he said to his brother. The next moment, Liam hit the glowing red light on his screen, terminating the connection.

Tucking the phone into his back pocket, he continued driving very slowly. As he began guiding his truck back down the incline, he could have sworn he heard a woman's scream.

Liam froze for a second, listening intently.

Nothing.

Had to be one of the ravens, he decided. Most likely a disgruntled bird that hadn't managed to find shelter before the rains hit, although he hadn't seen one just now.

Still, even though he was now driving down the incline to the trail he'd abandoned earlier, Liam kept listening, just to make sure that it was only his imagination—or some wayward animal—that was responsible

for the scream he'd thought he'd heard.

If it was his imagination, it was given to re-creating an extremely high-pitched scream, Liam decided, because he'd heard the cry for help again, fainter this time but still urgent, still high—and resoundingly full of absolute terror.

Someone *was* in trouble, Liam thought, searching for the source of the scream.

Throwing caution to the wind, he pushed down on the accelerator. The truck all but danced down the remainder of the incline in what amounted to a jerky motion. He had a death grip on the steering wheel as he proceeded to scan as much of the area around him as humanly possible.

Liam saw that the basin had completely filled up with rainwater. Something like that was enough to compromise any one of a number of people, even those who were familiar with this sort of occurrence and had lived in and around Forever most of their lives.

The water could rush at an unsuspecting driver with the speed of an oncoming train. Sadly, drownings in a flash flood were not unheard of.

With his eyes intently focused, Liam scanned the area again.

And again, he saw nothing except brackish-looking water.

"Maybe it *was* just the wind," Liam murmured under his breath.

He knew that there were times when the wind could sound exactly like a mournful woman pining after a missing lover.

If Brett were here with him, his older brother would have told him to get his tail on home.

Stop letting your imagination run away with you, Brett would have chided.

Liam was just about to get back on the road home when something—a gut feeling, or maybe just some stray, nagging instinct—made him look down into the rushing waters flooding the basin one last time.

That was when he saw her.

Saw the woman.

One minute she wasn't there at all, the next, a half-drowned-looking woman, her shoulder-length brown hair plastered to her face, came shooting up, breaking the water's surface like a man-made geyser, her arms flailing about madly as they came into contact with nothing but the air. It was obvious that she was desperately searching for something solid to grab on to.

The woman was drowning.

He'd only witnessed such abject panic once before in his life. Then it had been on the face of a friend who had accidentally discharged a pistol and missed his head by an inch, or less. The horror of what could have happened had been visible in his friend's shaken expression.

This time the horror of what could be was on the face of an angel. A very desperate, panicky, wet angel.

Before he had time to assess if this waterlogged angel was real or a mere figment of his overactive, overwrought imagination, Liam leaped out of his truck and came flying down the rest of the incline. There was no time to think, to evaluate and make calculated decisions. There was only time to act and act quickly.

Which he did.

Without pausing, he flung off his jacket because it would keep his arms too confined and from the little he had time to assess, he was going to need all the upper-arm power he could manage to summon. Leaving on his boots and hat, Liam dived into the water.

She was going down for the last time.

Four, she'd counted four. Four times she'd gone down and managed to somehow get back up again, desperately gasping for air.

Her thoughts were colliding wildly with one another. And she was hallucinating, Whitney was sure of it, because she'd just seen someone plunging into the water to rescue her.

Except that he wasn't real. This area was deserted. There was no one around, no one to rescue her.

She was going to die.

Suddenly, Whitney thought she felt something. Or was that someone? Whatever it was, it was grabbing her by the arm, no, wait, by the waist. Was she being pulled up, out of the homicidal waters?

No, it wasn't possible.

Wasn't possible.

It was just her mind giving her something to hang on to before life finally, irrevocably drained out of her forever.

Just a figment of her imagination. This rescuing hero she'd conjured up, he wasn't real.

And very, very soon, Whitney knew she wouldn't be real, either. But right now, she could have sworn she was being roughly dragged up out of the water.

Where was the light? Wasn't she supposed to be going toward some kind of light? Whitney wondered. But there was no light, there was only pressure and pain and the sound of yelling.

Did they yell in heaven?

Or was this the Other Place? She hadn't been an angel, but she wasn't bad enough to land in hell. Was she?

But being sent to hell would explain why something was beating against her, pushing on her ribs over and over again.

"C'mon, damn it, breathe! Breathe!" Liam ordered, frustrated and fearful all at the same time. The woman wasn't responding.

Damn it, Brett was the one who should be here, not him, Liam thought as he continued with his chest compressions. Brett would know what to do to save this woman. He just remembered bits and pieces of CPR, not from any sort of training but from programs he'd watched on TV as a kid.

Still, it was the only thing he could think to do and it was better than standing helplessly by, watching this woman die in front of him.

So he continued, almost on automatic pilot. Ten compressions against the chest, then mouth to mouth, and then back to compressions again until the dead were brought back to life.

Except that this woman—whatever she was—wasn't responding.

He was losing her.

The thought made him really angry and he worked harder.

Liam began another round, moving faster, pushing harder this time. He fully intended on continuing in this manner until he got some sort of a response from the woman he'd rescued from the water. Granted she'd looked more dead than alive when he'd pulled her out, but when he put his head against her chest, he was positive that he'd detected just the faintest sound of a heartbeat.

It gave him just a sliver of hope and he intended to build on that.

It came to her in a blurred, painful haze: she wasn't dead.

Dead people didn't hurt.

Did they?

Whitney hadn't given much thought to reaching the afterlife. She'd always been far too preoccupied in getting ahead in the life that she had on earth. But she felt fairly certain that after transitioning to the afterlife, pain and discomfort were no longer involved, certainly not to this degree—and she was definitely experiencing both. Big-time.

After what seemed like an absolute eternity, Whitney came to the realization that she wasn't inside of some dark abyss—or hell. The problem was that her eyes were shut. Not simply shut, it felt more as if they were glued down that way.

With what felt like almost superhuman effort, she kept on struggling until she finally managed to pry her eyes open.

Focusing took another full minute—her surroundings were a complete blur at first, wavy lines that made no sense. Part of her was convinced that she was still submerged.

But that was air she was taking in, not water, so she couldn't be underwater any longer. And what was that odd, heavy pain across her chest that she kept feeling almost rhythmically?

And then she saw him.

Saw a man with wet, medium blond hair just inches away from her face—and he had his hands crisscrossed on top of her chest.

"Why...are...you...pushing...on...my...chest?" The raspy words felt as if they had dragged themselves up a throat that was lined with jagged pieces of glass.

They weren't any louder than a faint whisper.

Liam's head jerked up and he almost lost his balance, certainly his count. Stunned, he stared at her in surprise and disbelief.

It worked! he thought, silently congratulating himself. She was alive!

He'd saved a life!

"I'm giving you CPR," he told her. "And I guess it worked," he added with pride and no small sense of satisfaction. He felt almost light-headed from his success.

"Then...I'm...not...dead?" she asked uncertainly. It took Whitney a second to process this influx of information on the heels of the panic that had enveloped her.

The last thing she clearly remembered was being thrown from the car and sinking into dirty water.

"Not unless I am, too—and I wasn't when I last checked," he told her. He'd actually saved a life. How about that? Right now, Liam felt as if he could walk on water.

It took him a minute to get back to reality.

The woman he'd rescued was looking at him with the widest green eyes he'd ever seen. She tried to sit up only to have him push her back down again. Confused, disoriented, she looked at him uncertainly.

"I don't think you should sit up just yet," he told her. She wanted to argue with him, but the energy just wasn't there. "You almost drowned. Why don't you give yourself a couple of minutes to recover?" he suggested tactfully.

"I'm...fine..." she insisted.

She certainly *was* fine, Liam couldn't help thinking. Even looking like a partially drowned little rabbit, there was no denying that this woman was strikingly beautiful. No amount of wet, slicked-back hair could change that.

Still, Liam didn't want her trying to run off just yet. She could collapse and hit her head—or worse. He hadn't just risked his own life to pull her out of the rushing waters only to have her bring about her own demise.

He continued to restrain her very gently.

"I just saved your life," Liam told her patiently. "Humor me."

The rains had obviously stopped and the waters, even now, were trying, ever so slowly, to recede. Within a couple of hours or so, it would be as if this had never happened—except that it had and an out-of-towner had almost died in it.

Talk about being in the right place at the right time, he mused. He was grateful now that band practice had run a little over. If it hadn't, he would have passed the basin when the rains hit and he would have never been there to rescue this woman.

"Okay." Whitney gave in, partially because she felt about as weak as a day-old kitten and partially because she was trying to humor the cowboy who had apparently rescued her. "But just for a few minutes," she stipulated, her speech still a little slow, definitely not as animated as it normally was.

Whitney tried to move her shoulders and got nowhere. Whoever this man was, he was strong. Definitely stronger than she was, she thought.

She'd never trusted strangers—but this one had saved her life so maybe a little trust *was* in order.

"Does this kind of thing happen often?" Whitney asked warily. Because if it did, she couldn't understand why anyone would want to live here.

Why not? her inner voice mocked. *You live in the land of earthquakes. One natural disaster is pretty much like another.*

Users Review

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