



Once Touched: A Silver Creek Novel

By Laura Moore

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For fans of Linda Lael Miller and Diana Palmer comes Laura Moore's breathtaking final installment in her Silver Creek contemporary romance series.

The youngest of the three Knowles siblings, Quinn has in her blood the love of the land and its beautiful creatures. Raising enough money to build an animal sanctuary is a dream Quinn lives every day—while fending off her family's well-intentioned matchmaking schemes. Though harboring secret fears about intimacy, Quinn soon realizes she cannot fight her growing attraction to a man who has suddenly entered her life.

Scarred by his months in Afghanistan and the violence he witnessed there through his camera lens, photojournalist Ethan Saunders throws himself into hard ranching work as a prescription for healing. But falling for Quinn has given him the one thing he thought he'd lost forever: hope. Ethan discovers that Quinn, like the innocent animals she rescues, is shy, and afraid of entrusting her heart to a man. Passion soon awakens Ethan's strength, and his tender seduction may be just what Quinn needs to believe in herself—and in his love.

Praise for *Once Touched* and Laura Moore

"Moore is a very talented and gifted writer who just made the characters, the setting, and the animals come to life. The story was touching, romantic, sexy, heartbreaking, heartwarming, and just an overall good read."—**Always YA at Heart**

"An emotional story of love, trust, and healing on many levels . . . I highly recommend this wonderful novel of family, hope, healing, and love."—**The Romance Dish**

"Ethan and Quinn together are so good. . . . The tender moments, the passion, and the sweetness combine to make this a very heartwarming romance."—**The Sassy Bookster**

"*Once Touched* is comprised of unique, realistic, and likable people. . . . This great read deserves a Perfect 10."—**Romance Reviews Today**

“Moore is a fantastic storyteller, ensnaring your interest from the first page.”—*Fresh Fiction*

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Once Touched: A Silver Creek Novel By Laura Moore Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #202203 in Books
- Published on: 2015-11-24
- Released on: 2015-11-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1

- Dimensions: 6.87" h x .95" w x 4.16" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Laura Moore lives in Rhode Island with her husband, two children, and their Labrador retriever. Laura Moore loves to hear from readers.

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Chapter One

These days, when Quinn Knowles needed a pair of ears to listen to her, she sought out long, furry ones in a soft dove gray that stuck out like handlebars on a bike.

People were all right to talk to now and again. But her friends and family were unsuitable at present, for the simple reason that they were part of her problem.

“Okay, so it might not be exactly fair to call love a ‘problem.’?” Perched on the goat pen’s top railing, she leaned forward to scratch Hennie’s furry chin. “But it’s all a bit much. I can’t take two steps without tripping over some blissed-out pair.”

Maybelle gave a bleat that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

“I’m not exaggerating,” Quinn said. “The situation is seriously annoying.”

In response, the doe stuck her nose in the feeder and withdrew a mouthful of timothy hay. Maybelle had a weakness for timothy.

“I’m willing to give the guests a pass. After all, that’s what they’re here for.” Located on three thousand bucolic acres in Northern California, the setting encouraged relaxation. The amenities and services that her family and Silver Creek’s staff provided were designed to pamper the senses. The ranch’s restaurant offered

delicious food, locally sourced. The cabins, stocked with luxury comforts—cloud-soft beds, combed-cotton bed linens, and bathtubs large enough to accommodate two with lots of wiggle room—created a sensual nest where guests could indulge and, in the true spirit of Marvin Gaye, get it on.

Wilhelmina stepped forward to nibble on Quinn's knee. Because she had a staff meeting to attend later, Quinn moved her leg a tad to the left, avoiding a smear of masticated hay and spit on the front of her jeans, and returned to the topic du jour.

"It'd be one thing if all this love and romance were confined to strangers passing through. But thanks to my family, the love vibe's closing in. And I'm the last one standing."

Both her brothers had fallen, and fallen hard. Ward, her oldest brother, was engaged to be married. Tess's and his wedding was scheduled for January, a mere three months away. Quinn preferred not to think about how fast the date was approaching. She'd attended enough weddings to be able to say with certainty that she was allergic to them.

Reid, her other brother—better and wiser than she was by four years, as he liked to claim—had also succumbed. He and Mia Bodell, their neighbor and one of Quinn's best friends, had announced their engagement last night at the Sunday family dinner. Mia had looked beautiful, radiant with happiness, and Reid couldn't stop grinning. Quinn's mother—equestrian by vocation, hotelier by profession, and matchmaker by some weird and deeply twisted impulse—had wept tears of joy and satisfaction. Her two sons were destined for happily-ever-afters with terrific women.

Of course Quinn was happy for the four of them. But that didn't mean she wanted to join the party. And it was getting old, her running into the lovers with their lips locked and their hands clutching and stroking. Their besotted cooing was driving her up the wall. She'd rather listen to her foster parrot Alfie's loudest shrieks any day.

Even her parents, who should be immune after thirty-plus years of marriage, were afflicted—infected—and were behaving like newlyweds.

Whatever was going around her family, Quinn intended to remain immune. The whole point of being a twenty-four-year-old woman in the twenty-first century was that she could be single and totally absorbed in her own thing. Call her selfish, but she had neither the time nor the inclination to deal with guys and their wants and expectations.

And she'd rather be set upon by fire ants than be needy herself.

Albertina ambled over to Gertrude and began mouthing her neck in some communal morning grooming. Gertrude's ears twitched in bliss.

"Don't get me wrong, girls. It's not that I have anything against love. It's just not for me. I can't have a man hanging around and slowing me down when I have so much to accomplish. Mom should understand that."

But Quinn had the sneaking suspicion her mother was at it again—the compulsive matchmaking business. Couldn't the woman leave well enough alone? It was embarrassing. Uncomfortable, too.

There was only one thing to do: figure out how to outwit a mother who was as wily as mothers came.

“You know my mom,” she continued. “She’s the one who brings you pine branches to chew. Nice lady, right? You’d think she’d be satisfied having two of her offspring happily matched and ready to say ‘I do’ before the minister. But no. She has to go and hire J—”

“You often talk to your goats, Quinn?” Josh Yates asked.

Speak of the chaps-wearing devil. Quinn teetered but managed to grab the metal bar and right herself before she fell splat onto Hennie. Glancing down, she saw that the animal’s almond-shaped eyes were closed.

Dang, she’d gone and talked her favorite goat to sleep.

Luckily Josh hadn’t noticed. Even luckier was that he’d arrived a millisecond before she said his name. Which meant somebody in the heavens was looking out for her.

“Oh, hey, Josh. Just a sec.” Swinging her legs over the rail, she jumped and landed next to the cowboy who unwittingly was part of her current dilemma. She swiped the dirt off the back of her jeans and caught herself wondering whether she’d remembered to brush her hair when she pulled it back this morning.

And didn’t that speak volumes?

She shouldn’t be worrying about how she looked. Wouldn’t be, except that Josh Yates was prettier than she was.

Josh and his cow pony, Waylon, had arrived ten days ago, hired by her parents to help with the fall sale of the cattle and to take up the slack when Ward and Tess’s January wedding came around.

His presence was a boon for Quinn as well. It would allow her to take off for a few days and avoid witnessing the steers being hauled away to the market to be sold and processed.

Quinn was happy to work on her family’s guest ranch in practically every capacity—she waited tables, led trail rides, herded sheep and cattle, helped train horses, tended dairy goats, and planted the kitchen’s vegetable garden. Heck, she even helped out with allergy-inducing wedding events. But she couldn’t take part in the slaughter of the cattle. It didn’t matter how humanely and painlessly the animals’ lives ended. The mere sight of the red and black Angus steers clambering up the ramps and into the trailers was enough to torment her.

That Quinn’s family cared enough to hire an extra ranch hand so that she could go off somewhere—in this case, spend a weekend at a wolf sanctuary—and be distracted from her horror and guilt was just one reason she adored them, her exasperating mother included.

Being a fair person, her gratitude necessarily extended to Josh, despite the fact that he was more than a touch unnerving.

It was easy to see why he’d been plucked from the pool of applicants. Josh had grown up on a large Texas cattle ranch and possessed all the necessary experience and wrangling skills; there’d been no breaking-in period. And his easygoing attitude made him a good fit with the guests who took advantage of the miles of trail riding the ranch offered.

It certainly didn’t hurt that he had the rugged cowboy look down to a T.

Quinn usually remained unaffected by a guy's appearance. But Josh, with his thick, curly blond hair, caramel brown eyes, squared-off cleft chin, and aw-shucks grin, was why the term eye candy had been invented. The rest of him was equally distracting. He was tall, with exactly the right amount of honed muscle. One look, and a woman knew that here was a man willing to work his body hard.

It was this made-to-order aspect to Josh, his rugged good looks and his familiarity with ranch life, that had immediately put Quinn on her guard and made her suspect her mother was trying to extend her run of matchmaking.

Normally this would be enough to put Josh on Quinn's top ten list of people to avoid at all costs. The thing was, she liked him. A part of her secretly acknowledged that if she were to want someone in her life, Josh Yates would be a prime candidate.

And then there was that little voice inside her head telling her that maybe it was time to try again. It was just possible Josh would get the job done where others before had failed.

She'd been on the verge of divulging as much to Hennie and the girls when he'd interrupted her with his comment about talking to her goats.

"Sure I talk to them," she said, plucking a stray blade of half-chewed timothy off the seam of her jeans. "I'll have you know they're seriously underrated as listeners."

"Me, I prefer to share my thoughts with Waylon." Josh's horse was a blue roan paint, possibly even dreamier-looking than his owner.

"Hmm," Quinn said noncommittally. "Well, my gelding Domino is a noble beast, but that can be a problem conversation-wise. I feel petty if I complain to him. Sooner, my Sheltie, is so focused on listening for my next command, he sometimes misses the big picture. As for my cat, Pirate, he's way too critical. There's always the sheep, but they're kind of placid. And really, who wants to talk to a steer?"

Her exaggerated eye roll had Josh laughing. "You've convinced me. Next time I need to share, I'll come over and chat awhile with your goats," he said, and then cursed softly as some of the coffee he was carrying—in not one but two mugs—sloshed over the rims.

"What's with the doubling up of joe?" she asked. "Were you out painting our fair town of Acacia red last night?"

"Well .??.?" He drew out the word, as if enjoying the sound of it. From what she'd observed, Josh enjoyed many things. "Figured it was past time I got the lay of the land. Your buddy Jim introduced me to The Drop last night. We shot a couple rounds of pool with two nice ladies, Nancy and .??.?" Beneath his cowboy hat, his lips pursed as he searched his memory.

"Maebeth," Quinn supplied. "They work at the luncheonette in town."

"That's right," he said, nodding and smiling again. "They were real welcoming. Invited me down for a stack of pancakes—on the house—as soon as I have a morning off."

"That was friendly of them." She could imagine just how friendly the single women would be toward the new hottie in town, especially now that her brother Reid was very much taken. "So you liked The Drop?"

“Yeah, I did. Fun joint, but”—his voice lowered a shade to a warm rumble—“it would’ve been even more fun with you there, Quinn. Maybe next time you’ll give me a tour of the local scene. Your face is way prettier than Jim’s.”

“Don’t let Jim know. He’ll be devastated.”

“Here.” He extended one of the mugs toward her. A wispy tail of steam floated in the air. “This one’s for you. You take it black with sugar, right?”

Unnerved as she was at the prospect of a distractingly good-looking cowboy bringing her coffee and taking the time to indulge in an early morning flirtation, she nonetheless accepted the ceramic mug. Quinn was not the type of woman to turn down caffeine.

“That’s right, I do. Thanks,” she said lightly as she reminded herself that all the male ranch hands and wranglers at Silver Creek were like brothers and uncles to her. No need to treat Josh any differently.

Together they began walking toward the horse barn. This was Quinn’s favorite time of day, when everything was quiet and all about the care of the animals. In the corrals and pastures, she saw the horses’ jaws working as they enjoyed their morning hay.

Keeping her tone casual, she continued. “So, you’re coffee-ing me up, huh? What’s the angle?”

“Waylon’s thrown a shoe. Luckily the blacksmith’s coming this afternoon. But I was wondering if you’d let me ride Domino this morning. Pete asked me to lead a group.”

“You’re taking the guests out this morning?” Josh had been here less than two weeks, and Pete Williams, their foreman, was already letting him lead trail rides. In case anyone doubted how well Josh was adapting to his role as ranch hand, here was an embossed seal of approval. The safety of Silver Creek’s guests was paramount.

“It’s a small group, only six riders. Beginners. Afterward he wants me to ride the fence line.”

“And you want me to lend Domino to you?” She shook her head in mock despair. “A pecan pumpkin muffin should really accompany that kind of request, Josh. I mean, you’re an okay rider and all, but Domino, he’s—”

“Special. A prince.” Josh’s Texas twang, his dimples, and the cleft in his square chin might be awfully cute, but it was his keen eye in judging horses that was damned near irresistible.

“He’s all that and more.”

“I know it’s a huge favor.”

“It sure is,” she said, her gaze seeking out her black Appaloosa gelding. He was in the near corral, sniffing the ground for stray bits of hay. “But I guess I’ll lend him to you. A really great horse will boost your self-confidence, and I can see yours is a little shaky this morning.”

He shot her a sideways glance. “You definitely rattle mine. The girls back home are much easier to ask out.”

If he only knew just how challenging she was .??.

No need to go there now, she told herself, and tried for her breeziest smile as she ignored his comment, saying instead, “It actually works out well, your riding Domino—”

“Since you’ve got a meeting. Yeah, Pete mentioned y’all would be busy.”

She raised her brow. “Checking up, huh?”

His shrug was unabashed. “I figured you’d be happy knowing Domino was enjoying this pretty morning while you’re stuck inside talking business and bottom lines. And that might make you more inclined to say yes to a date.”

The line was so smoothly delivered, she couldn’t help but laugh. “Neatly planned.”

Josh tipped his hat in acknowledgment. “Planning’s important. I like to get what I want.”

Quinn was okay with that—she liked getting what she wanted, too. The question was whether she really wanted to get to know Josh .??. in a more intimate way. Could she bring herself to try to have sex again? Because experiencing yet another colossal failure at intimacy would be beyond mortifying with a man like Josh.

An excellent argument for ignoring his calendar-pinup body, cleft chin, Texas twang, and appreciation for fine horseflesh. But if she continued rejecting every man she met, she’d soon be the oldest virgin in California.

Was it any wonder she talked to goats?

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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