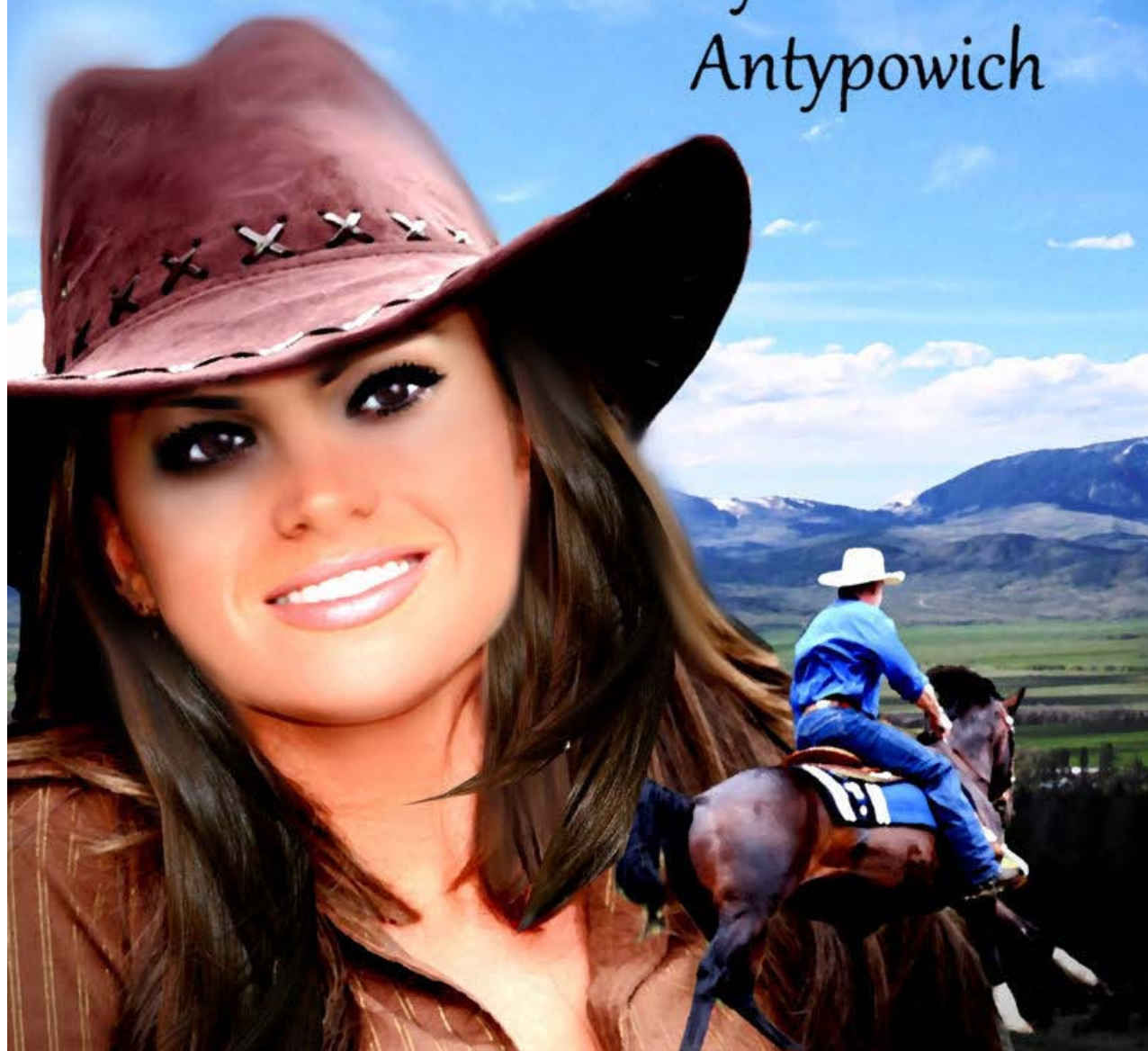


New Cover

Hearts at risk....

first book in the thompson family trilogy

By Gloria
Antypowich



Hearts At Risk

Gloria Antypowich

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This book is dedicated to my husband Lloyd, who drove with me from our home in British Columbia to the Cypress Hills in southern Saskatchewan and back, (about 3000 kms) so I could do research for this book;

To my long time friend, Anne Quennell who worked tirelessly through the first draft with me;

Also to my oldest granddaughter, Jennifer and her boyfriend (my “adopted” grandson), Ty, who actually are ranchers and ride the range together. They posed for the picture on the cover. Thanks to my son and daughter who did the photography. And last, but definitely not least, my deepest Thanks to all of you who supported me by reading and editing this work and giving me “Book Reviews” to use in the front cover of the book.

Hearts at Risk Book Reviews:

This is a great book. I read it in a few hours. Actually I started it on a Sunday, towards evening, and then went to bed at 10 pm. I could not go to sleep because I wanted to finish the book, so I got up and did it.

This book is very close to real life. I am sure every woman can see herself in some sections of the story. I know I did. It is easy to read and almost didn't feel like fiction at all. I just loved it! S. Laffer; meat cutter and school bus driver and avid reader

Wonderfully written. Captivating from beginning to end. Draws you in and makes you wish it didn't have to end. RJB (didn't want to use her name, only initials.)

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My painful experiences can be positive
as they can make me a deeper
and more understanding person;
My beautiful experiences are positive
and they can give me extra strength and
faith to face the painful experiences.
If I avoid having painful experiences,
I seem to lose the beautiful ones
. . . and my spirit slowly dies.

—Brock Tully

Reflection

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Prologue

“So what is your real name?”

The attractive eighteen-year-old sitting on the fender of his horse trailer had caught Martin Coles' eye several times during the past couple of years. She had been jailbait when she'd first come on the high school rodeo scene; cute and good at what she did, but not quite in his target range. But she had blossomed into a real beauty. He wasn't seeing anyone special right now, so maybe she was worth getting to know.

She grinned at him, her expressive dark eyes laughing, as she moved her head slightly to flip her long hair away from her face. She'd been asked that question innumerable times before.

“My honest to God, real name, is Frankie Lamonte. It says so on my birth certificate, my social insurance card, and my driver's license.”

“No disrespect, but who would give a beautiful girl like you a name like *Frankie*? That's a guy's name.”

“It is. I'm named after my grandfather. His name was Frank. Mom and Dad softened it a little by adding the 'ie.' They couldn't have any more kids; it was a small miracle that they had me. So, I'm the boy my dad never could have, and I've been in his shirt pocket ever since I was born. I get along just fine with it. I dare say it's better than if your dad had called you 'Sue,' eh?”

“You wise ass. Like the man in black, I'd have wanted to kill him too!” replied the young cowboy with a grin.

She had noticed him during the past couple of years too, but he always had one special girl at his side, and as far as she knew, he hadn't even realized that she existed. She was surprised that he did now. To this point, she'd been just one of the gang. She had been having too much fun, roping and just hanging with the rodeo crowd to even consider actually getting involved with any one guy.

Besides that, her dad had kept a pretty close eye on her. Some of the cowboys were “notch counters” as Dad called them. They didn't let any grass grow under their feet, moving from one girl to the next. And he didn't want his daughter to end up just being another notch on some guy's belt.

“So how long have you been team-roping?” he asked.

“Well, Dad taught me to ride as soon as Mom would let him put me on a horse. Dad loved to go to the rodeo, but he never got into competing. But Wilson Roberts was a roper, and he and Dad were good friends, so his son, Clint and I hung out together a lot.

When we were about six or seven years old, we started fooling around with a lariat, trying to lasso an old cow's head that Clint's dad had stuck on a bale for him to practice on. As we got older, we graduated to working off the horses. It took a few years, but eventually we made a good team. We would go to the local rodeos and some of the smaller team-roping events around the Stettler area in central Alberta. Then we got into

High School Rodeo. We've roped together so long, it's just second nature now."

"Well, you're certainly a good team!"

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"My mom and dad live near Saskatoon. This is my last year in High School Rodeo. I'm going to Western Veterinary College in the fall. It's part of the program at the University of Saskatoon."

"No way! I'm going there too! I graduate in June. I got accepted by Western when I put in my first application. I couldn't believe my good fortune; there is always such a long waiting list. It may have helped that I've spent half of all my teenage years in Dr. Winters' office, helping out however and wherever I could. I love it! He gave me a really good reference. And my marks were okay too."

"That is a given or you would never have gotten in so quickly. My God! Brains as well as beauty," he commented, looking at her with respect. "We'll be in the same class. What a coincidence."

"Hey, guys, what are you doing?" A short, muscular bronc rider came walking up.

"Hi there, Willie! We're just talking. Actually, we just discovered we are both going to vet college in Saskatoon this fall," Martin answered.

"You brainiacs! But hey, good on you. I'm taking time out from all this learning stuff. I think I'm going to travel around a bit—maybe do a little rodeoing, then I'd like to head for Aussie land, and maybe New Zealand for a while."

So where do you live, Willie?" Frankie asked curiously.

"My folks have a small place out here, on the way to the Cypress Hills."

"The Cypress Hills!" she exclaimed. "They have always sounded sort of romantic to me—just the name—*Cypress Hills*. It makes me think of faraway places, like Cypress or Europe or someplace exotic. For a long time, I thought there must be cypress trees growing there, in the middle of the prairies. Of course, I know better now, but I've always wanted to go there. It sounds like such an interesting area—it's hard to believe that it is so different. The land is so flat around here. The hills are about two thousand feet higher than here, aren't they?"

"Yeah. And you're right, there's no cypress trees. Not quite that exotic, but the entire Cypress Hills area is pretty unique. Not quite the mountains, but there are some pretty steep hills and lush valleys, and great creeks and rivers for fishing. There are some great little lakes hidden away in different spots and lots of pine trees and plants and animals that aren't found in this area. All in all, I guess it's really pretty spectacular. I've just kind of gotten used to it, and I guess I take it for granted."

"I seem to remember that there is a fort or something out there too."

"Fort Walsh—it's a museum and national historic site now. Yes, there's lots of history in those hills: even a massacre. That's mostly what brought the law into town! Don't miss visiting the fort if you get a chance to visit the hills."

"I'll have to make a point of getting out there while I'm at vet school."

* * *

Eight years later, Frankie Lamonte has finished her veterinary training. Her love for the rodeo is still strong and she finds herself in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, again. This time she is a spectator at the event, not a competitor.

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Chapter One

The cowboy lounging in the shade by the stable door had few illusions about beautiful women. He had learned years ago that appearances are only skin-deep. In spite of that, he could always appreciate a pretty face and a good body, and the girl who was sliding out of the pickup had both.

He watched with appreciation as she inhaled deeply, tilting her head back and sliding her hands under the heavy fall of her hair, lifting it away from her damp neck. She forked her fingers into its glinting coppery length, letting it fan from her fingertips, and float back around her shoulders as she extended her arms back and outward. Not bad, he thought.

Frankie Lamonte arched her slender, long-legged body and stretched to relieve the tension from the long drive into town. It's going to be another scorcher, she reflected as she looked up at the cloudless Saskatchewan sky.

Squinting against the glare of the sun, she looked around, savoring the familiar scene. A soft smile curved her lips, and her expressive brown eyes began to sparkle with growing excitement. Her nose wrinkled as she sniffed, cataloging the smells that drifted in the air—dust, animal sweat, and the aroma of food from the concession stands were dominant. Her mind registered the sounds. The clanking steel gates, excited cattle bellowing, and horses whinnying blended with the human elements: talking, laughter, shouts, and curses . . . to create the traditional language of the rodeo.

Swift Current, she mused. "It's been years since I was here last, but nothing seems to have changed . . . except for the addition of the racetrack." Her eyes swept the length of the wide oval that ran past the grandstand, then stretched out to encircle a large area behind the arena and the holding pens. Briefly she let her glance linger on the pens. Just as briefly, she considered going over to have a look at the animals in them, then pushed the thought aside. "No point in it," she said with a sigh. "That's part of the past."

She shielded her eyes with a slender hand as she turned to look in the direction of the stables. That was where she would find Jim Greer. She turned and threaded her way through the maze of trucks and campers toward them.

The cowboy's green eyes followed her every movement from beneath the Stetson that shadowed his face. He'd give her a strong nine on the scale of one to ten, he decided as he appraised her coolly as she came towards him. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to be conscious of her looks. At first glance, he couldn't detect any phony airs. In fact, she had a natural kind of grace—almost a sense of elegance, even dressed as she was in slim cut blue jeans, a Western shirt and serviceable Western boots.

Reluctant admiration lurked in his eyes, and he wondered idly what it would be like to run his fingers through that beautiful hair. He watched her hesitate at the door and look around before she stepped inside. Deep inside, a warning sounded from his subconscious. Feelings that he had buried years ago and refused to

acknowledge now stirred. He watched her hesitate at the door and look around before she stepped inside.

Pausing momentarily while her eyes adjusted to the change of light, Frankie breathed deeply, appreciating the coolness of the building in contrast to the heat outside. She ignored the twinges of conscience that reminded her that she should find Jim before she did anything else. True, he would be looking for her, but she never could resist a chance to look at a good hunk of horseflesh. With a happy smile, she wandered from stall to stall. As far as she was concerned, they were all beautiful but her attention was drawn again and again to one particular animal.

“Well, Jetsetter’s Lady, from Cantuar Stables,” she murmured as she stopped to read the form stapled to the door of the stall. “You’re impressive.” She whistled softly as she studied the horse’s pedigree. Straightening, she rested her hand on the stall door and eyed the horse with appreciation. “I’ll bet you are dynamite on the track!” she exclaimed softly as she reached in and tried to coax the filly closer. The horse turned its fine head away, watching her cautiously out of the corner of its eye, its velvety nostrils flaring slightly.

“Oh, oh, going to be coy, eh?” Frankie quickly glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone was watching, then reached into her pocket for a sugar cube, and offered the sweet enticement to the horse. She hadn’t paid any attention to the cowboy by the door when she’d come in and wasn’t aware that he moved quietly and swiftly now, crossing the distance from the door of the stable to the stall where she stood.

“What the hell are you up to?” The warning note in the quiet voice sent chills rippling down her spine. Her heart stalled momentarily. She froze in position, leaning over the door with her arm outstretched.

A firm hand fell on her shoulder. The muscle beneath its weight twitched involuntarily, as a dizzying surge of adrenaline shot through her body, making her heart beat erratically, and her knees feel weak. Her breath shuddered out slowly as she looked through the corner of her eye at the long calloused fingers that curved down toward her breast. Cautiously she turned her head toward her captor. Her cheek brushed the hand that cupped her shoulder. The contact jolted her, and she jerked as if she’d been burned. The heavy lashes that shadowed her smooth cheeks flew up, lifting her startled dark eyes to meet a pair of compelling green ones that riveted her to the spot.

“Lady, I watched you come in here. This is the third time you’ve come back to this stall, and you looked damn suspicious when you were fishing in your pocket for whatever you’ve got there. Let’s see it.” His voice mesmerized her, its velvety texture cloaking the steely undercurrent of warning.

Bemused, she watched his hand slide down her arm. It seemed massive in size, strong, and work-hardened, but the hand of a man that knew his strength. Now, as it captured her wrist, the touch was firm and authoritative. She tightened her fist and tried to wrench free. “Let me go,” she demanded weakly, her voice trembling with a vibrant awareness of him that shocked her.

“Look, I’ve caught you red-handed. You’ll only make it worse if you fight me. Now let’s see what you’ve got there,” the words vibrated close to her ear, his lips so near that his warm breath fanned her cheek. She knew that if she turned ever so slightly, her flesh would brush his. An awareness seeped into her body, like water into a blotter. She became conscious of his broad chest pressing against her back, pinning her to the door. She could

feel the rippling muscles of his arm as it rested over hers, aligning with the hand that grasped her wrist. He enveloped her, imprisoning her.

She hated being confined. This man's touch electrified her senses, made her feel threatened, even claustrophobic. Frantic, she struggled to free herself.

He muttered a soft curse and whisked her away from the door,

keeping her pinned against his hard chest. His steel grip pressed her against him as he squeezed her wrist, attempting to force her clenched fist open. Those strong fingers were hurting now. She willed herself not to cry out. Desperate, she lifted her foot and brought it down with all the strength she could summon, grinding the heel of her cowboy boot into the arch of his foot.

"You little hell cat!" The gasp that accompanied his words told her that she had made her mark, and when his grip slackened momentarily, she took advantage of it and sprang from the circle of his steely embrace.

A visual impression flashed through her mind as she whirled to face him. He was a good-looking man; not the movie star handsome way, but a satisfyingly strong one. The strength in his features didn't diminish a certain sensuality, and there were firm lines of humor around his mouth and eyes. His skin was bronzed by the wind and sun, evidence of hours spent out of doors, just as the calluses on his hands suggested a physically demanding lifestyle. Beneath the brim of the Stetson, thick black hair tapered neatly to the collar of his crisp denim shirt. The set of his square chin suggested a stubborn streak, an impression that was backed by the stance he assumed as he faced her. His big hands rested on his hips. His feet, set slightly apart and firmly planted, emphasized the strength of his thighs and the length of his legs. The way he stood told her that he intended to get what he wanted.

From the hidden recesses of her personality, an impertinent imp reared its head, driven by an emotion she couldn't define. What was it? Excitement? Fear? Anger? Whatever it was, it made her want to challenge him—or was it defy him? Her voice rose several decibels and her eyes glinted.

"See . . ." She trembled as she opened her clenched fist. "It's a sugar cube. If you had asked, I would've shown you." She hesitated for a second, teetering on the brink between wisdom and impulse. Impulse won. "Have it!" She threw the offending sugar cube at him.

He flinched as it hit his cheek. She knew an exhilarating rush of excitement as she spun on her heel, intent on escaping before he could apprehend her again.

Two steps brought her to an abrupt halt. She became aware of a small crowd that had gathered to witness the skirmish. In an instant, she realized that she had let her emotions get uncharacteristically out of hand. A wave of embarrassment washed over her, sending a crimson flush sweeping up her throat and into her cheeks. With a gesture of false bravado, she raised her chin and stared straight ahead as she marched stiffly through the curious onlookers.

A hand came from behind and grabbed her arm. She whirled without thinking, her free hand raised to strike. "Hey! Take it easy. It's me . . . Jim."

"Jim." Relief flooded into her face. "Am I ever glad to see you!"

He eyed her raised hand uneasily. "If that's how you treat a guy when you're glad to see him, I'd hate to be around when you're not." Lifting an eyebrow, he looked at her questioningly. "What happened back there? Was that you yelling?"

The words tumbled out as she described the scene he had just missed. "The horse didn't even get a whiff of the sugar cube," she concluded angrily.

"Frankie . . . you should've known better," he chided. "Competition gets pretty stiff among some of these guys. Every once in a while someone tries to drug a horse, to slip it something to put it off stride for the race. I don't wonder he was suspicious." He chuckled. "Anyway, it sounded like you stood your ground with him."

She scuffed the dirt with the toe of her boot, staring at the ground. "Okay," she admitted reluctantly, "maybe I overreacted a little bit." She darted a sheepish look at him.

"Well . . ." He chuckled. "He knows you're no pushover anyway." He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "What time did you get here?" he asked, changing the subject. "I've been watching for you

"Around eleven." She fell into step with him, still too shaken to shrug his arm away. "Have you been to the stables?" Excitement sparkled in her eyes again. "That horse . . . the one I was trying to give a sugar cube to . . . she's called Jetsetter's Lady. She's a beauty! I'm going to put some money on her. According to Ollie, this is the first time they've had racing in Swift Current. Do you think fate decreed that Jetsetter's Lady and I would both be here today? Maybe she'll be a winner and change both of our lives."

Jim laughed, stopping. "The prize money on that horse wouldn't be enough to change your life no matter how hot she was today. Maybe it is fate, but if so, I hope I'm the one involved in your destiny, not some race horse. Now that would really change your life."

Frankie stopped short, staring at him uneasily. "Jim, please don't. I don't want to get involved again for a long, long time. I'm enjoying my freedom."

"Okay, okay! But you can't knock a guy for trying." He slipped his arm around her again, pulling her close. "Now tell me about this place where you work. What's it called again?"

"Thompson Land and Cattle Company. It's a father and son operation. They have a grain farm near Swift Current and a ranch near Ravenscrag. Thompson Sr. had a heart attack a couple of years ago, so the son took over the grain farm and Ollie, the foreman who hired me, runs the ranch."

"How many cattle do they have?"

"Around one hundred registered Limousin and about three hundred commercial crossbred cows. Ollie says Colt's heart is with the cattle, but he has a real passion for horses too. From what I've seen of the horses at the ranch, I'd say he has some pretty good stock."

Jim looked puzzled. "I can't imagine you working as a ranch hand. Why? You're a natural veterinarian." He stopped, finally lifting his arm from around her shoulder and removing his cowboy hat. He ran a hand through his tousled hair. "It just doesn't make sense to me."

"I wanted a complete change." She kicked a pebble and sent it rolling in front of her. "I'd been under a lot of stress. I needed to get away."

She sighed heavily. There had been so many things, too personal, too painful to discuss with a casual friend like Jim. Her father's accident and near brush with death that resulted in the sale of the farm, because the doctor had told him that he'd never be able to do heavy work again. That place had represented security and had been an integral part of her childhood. The loss still weighed heavily on her. And Martin . . . God! It still hurt when she thought of the way he had dumped her for Colleen. The last straw had been working at the

vet clinic with them both on a daily basis. She had thought she could handle it, but now she knew better. If she hadn't escaped the constant pain of it, she would have had a breakdown.

To Jim, she said merely, "The ranch is peaceful, and Ollie is just great to work for. I've never met the owners . . . just Ollie."

"You mean you haven't met the boss yet? This Colt fellow?"

"I guess he's been busy at the farm." She shrugged. "He's been out a few times to bring our paychecks but I've always been running errands in town or out riding." She grinned. "For all I know, the man doesn't even exist. He was supposed to help brand and move the cattle to the grazing lease, but at the last minute, he couldn't make it so we did it ourselves. Right now I'm staying out at the lease, where they pasture the cattle for the summer."

He stared at her. "You mean you're camping out with the cows?"

She giggled. "Hardly! Ollie pulled a thirty-foot travel trailer out there for me. It has a shower and toilet, even a small microwave oven, plus the standard fridge and stove. It's even got one of those small built-in generators for electricity. I just have to flick a switch and it starts up or shuts off. All of the convenience of home! So much for roughing it."

Jim grinned. "That foreman probably can't believe his luck, having a beautiful chick like you working out there in the boondocks with him. He's just making sure you'll stay on by giving you all that luxury on the job."

"Not a chance. Ollie's old enough to be my dad, and he was unpleasantly surprised when he found out I was a woman."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "When I came to the ranch, Ollie met the bus at Maple Creek. It had never crossed his mind that 'Frankie Lamonte' could be a woman. He had just assumed that I was a man. From what he said, I got the impression that Colt Thompson is a real chauvinist with definite ideas about a woman's place in this world. Ollie planned to send me back on the next bus."

"So, why didn't he?"

"Well, he took me out to the ranch for the night, because he was too much of a gentleman to just leave me on the street. When we got there, it was dark already, and one of the heifers was calving and it was obvious that there were problems. The calf's head wasn't in the right position in the birth canal and it just couldn't come out. Ollie wasn't in a good mood to start with because of the problem I created for him. On top of that, he'd been gone for at least three hours from the time he'd left to pick me up, until he gotten back to the ranch and time can be important in a difficult birth. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd dealt with that problem, but he'd been getting up a couple of times every night to check the cows for any calving problems. He'd been doing it for a couple of weeks, and he was tired. His long-time hired hand had gotten sick and had to quit, so he'd been doing it on his own. He'd been looking forward to having someone to spell him off again, and the man he'd been expecting turned out to be a damned woman.

"Anyway, the heifer was on the smallish side and I could see right away that it would be easier for me to get in there and get the head straightened around than it would be for him. He was astonished when I put on the gloves and took over. I had the advantage of smaller hands, and with my training, even though it was a tough job, I managed to deliver the calf and we were able to save it. He was impressed. He sidestepped around the issue of sending me back and we've got along great ever since." She smiled, remembering Ollie's curiosity

about her skills. She hadn't told him she was a vet. She was afraid of questions that he'd ask about why she was working as a ranch hand instead of practicing in a clinic.

Jim's attention was wandering, and she sensed that he had lost interest in the subject. He didn't press her with more questions, suggesting instead that they go to the bleachers.

"We could go to the grandstand, but I thought you'd like to get as close to the action as possible. It might get a bit hot, sitting out in the open like that though."

"Not at all! The bleachers are great!" she assured him. She wanted a good view of the events. Twenty minutes later, the opening exercises started on schedule, with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police executing their dramatic musical ride. The colorful display was followed by the introduction of dignitaries, judges, and queen contestants.

The familiar scene triggered happy memories from her past. Her blood sang with excitement. Her face was glowing when she turned to look at Jim. "I hadn't realized how much I missed all this! It feels so good to be in the flow of things again, even if it's just for the weekend. Have you ever noticed that it doesn't matter where you go, the smells and sounds and the atmosphere of a rodeo are always the same?"

Frankie found the thought comforting. Like the hand of an old friend, it reached out to her from the past, reminding her of the happy times when she and her fiancé, Martin, had team-roped at every event they could work into their busy schedule. Memories washed over her, resurrecting feelings of carefree happiness that had been a part of those days.

For the moment, the joy of those feelings blotted out the misery that had nearly overwhelmed her when Martin had left her. She was filled with an invigorating sense of expectancy, embracing the possibility of finding the same carefree happiness once again. Suddenly, she was glad that Jim had phoned and asked her to meet him and that Ollie had persuaded her to accept the invitation when she would've refused it. Impulsively she leaned her cheek against his shoulder. "I'm glad you asked me to come, though it's too bad you're not roping."

He shrugged. "I was disappointed at first, but now . . . well, do you realize that this is the first time you have been unattached since I've known you? I'm going to do my best to make up for lost time this weekend."

She drew away. "Jim . . ."

"I know, I know. You don't want to get involved right now."

Thankfully, the rodeo event started then, discouraging conversation. After they were finished, the announcer reminded the crowd that the horse races would start in forty-five minutes. The grandstand had to be cleared, and the tickets for the races to be purchased at the front windows. Frankie and Jim left the bleachers with the rest of the crowd, crossing the grounds to the concession stands behind the grandstand. Jim bought them each a hamburger and a cold drink before they joined the line up at the grandstand, waiting for their turn at the ticket window.

Once they were inside the gates, Frankie searched through the program, looking for Jetsetter's Lady. "Here she is!" she said excitedly, jabbing the program with her finger. "She runs in the fourth race. Let's see what they have to say about her." A frown creased her forehead. "Hmm. It's her maiden run, and they don't make any fancy predictions for her success. But Jim, I know she can do it! I have a feeling about her."

Jim gave her an amused look when she returned. "Hey, look up there. Isn't that the guy you had the run in with this morning? He's sitting up there a couple of rows behind us."

Frankie twisted to look back. Her eyes collided with the same green ones she had looked into earlier that day. They no longer shot fiery sparks, but they were still compelling. Now they studied her thoroughly, drawing her like a magnet, rendering her powerless to break the contact. A sudden feeling of lightheadedness overtook her, and her heart began to hammer against her ribs. She could only stare back, her dark eyes wide and startled, her lips slightly parted.

“Isn’t that him?”

“Yes,” her answer was a soft gasp. Jim’s question had broken the hypnotic hold, but she was strangely disturbed by the brief encounter and the feelings lingered when she sat down. She had to force herself to focus her attention on the horses in the race at hand.

“The horses are in the gates,” Jim commented. Almost immediately they heard the sound of the pistol and the clank of the metal as the gates opened. The horses bolted onto the track, Frankie stood up, straining to see where her favorite was in the running. “Go Lady! Go! Go! Go!” she yelled. As the horses entered the backstretch, she dashed up a couple of rows to afford herself a better view. The horse held third place until they rounded the last curve, then Frankie saw the jockey flick his whip, and the little black filly surged forward, maneuvering past second place, gaining steadily on the lead horse.

“Take her! Take her! Come on. You can do it. I know you can!” She was screaming, jumping up and down as the horse edged alongside the front runner and held the pace neck and neck for a few strides. “Take her now, girl. You can do it!” The jockey flicked his whip lightly and Jetsetter’s Lady edged ahead to win the race by a nose

“She did it! She did it! I knew she would,” she cried, swinging to the man beside her and throwing her arms around him. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Strong arms enfolded her. Lips lowered to claim hers. Maybe it was his scent, or the feel of the muscled arms and those big strong hands on her back. Maybe it was the strange chemistry between them that sent her senses tingling. Whatever, she realized with a shock that something wasn’t right. Her startled eyes flew open to meet laughter-filled green slits just an eyelash from her own. She stiffened. Pushing back, she stared up into a face that wore a jubilant smile.

“Oh my god.” Her face flushed crimson. Consternation flooded through her. “I . . . it . . . it can’t be . . .” She stiffened and arched her body away from his. “I am . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t realize . . .” she stammered, looking around in confusion. She pushed herself away, lost her balance, and staggered backward to teeter on the edge of the seat, where she stood. His hand shot out to steady her, pulling her back against his solid chest. She jerked away. Face flaming, she wheeled and dashed down the steps to the safety of Jim.

Behind her, a smile lingered on the cowboy’s lips as he watched her retreat. Then he strode down the steps and into the arena, to be recognized as the owner of the winning horse and to have his picture taken with the jockey and the trainer.

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Chapter Two

An hour later, Frankie had collected her winnings, accepted an invitation to dinner with Jim, and drove back to the motel.

She reflected on the day as she stood under the shower. Jim was good company, but she would have to be careful with him. A frown creased her forehead. She didn't want any complications—just a good time without any ties or demands. She blinked back tears. She had learned a painful lesson with Martin. She'd been so involved, so loving, and so trusting. In the end, all the love and romantic dreaming had accomplished was to pave the way to disappointment and heartache. From here on out, life was going to be a dance: no idealistic dreams, no commitments, and nothing serious. She was going to remain carefree and fill her life with fun and laughter.

After turning off the shower, she stepped out and wiped the water from her eyes with her hand. Picking up a towel, she began to rub herself briskly as if to dispel the feelings of unhappiness that accompanied her musings. Her skin took on a pleasant tingling glow. She stood, looking at her reflection in the mirror while she dried her hair.

Hypnotically, her mind drifted back to her relationship with Martin as she contemplated her image; slender waist, softly rounded hips, long supple legs, and firm breasts with flushed, pointed tips. Although she had loved Martin, the principles her parents had raised her by had made her shy away from giving herself completely to him. But eventually, she had succumbed to Martin's persuasions. He had reveled in the change in their relationship, satiated by the gratification of his own needs. But for her, there had been none of the glorious heights she'd heard about; no bursting stars, no wonder of fulfillment—only a sense of is this all there is?

"Stop this." She impatiently tossed the damp towel onto the vanity beneath the mirror. "It's been a great day and you're not going to let any ghosts from the past spoil it." But her mind wouldn't be stilled. Even now, as she concentrated on the task of drying her hair, flashes of Martin possessing her, flipped through her mind. While she applied a light touch of makeup, she tried desperately to forget the feelings of sexual inadequacy that had come to haunt her with time.

She was still frowning when she turned to lift a cream-colored sundress from the back of the chair, where she had draped it. It was made of lavishly embroidered cotton, styled with spaghetti straps, and a full skirt. The fitted bodice was lined, and she usually wore it without a bra, as she would that night. She slid the dress over her head and reached back to ease the zipper closed, then looked critically at her image reflected in the mirror. The cream color was a perfect foil for her own coloring, and the dress was one of her favorites. She shook off her disturbing thoughts and curtsied mockingly. "Not bad," she decided.

As she turned away from the mirror, she caught the reflection of a darkened area on her wrist. She frowned as her fingers automatically sought the spot and massaged it gently. The incident in the stables played before her like the rerun of a video. She could clearly

visualize the cowboy; his compelling green eyes, the firm features of his face, and the confident set of his shoulders. She trembled as the memory of his velvety voice sent ripples down her spine. The skin on her arms quivered as she recalled the strength of his hands and the feel of his muscled arm against hers. The steady rhythm of her heart accelerated as she remembered the feel of his lips, firm and warm, against her own.

That kiss had not been a passionate one, so why had his lips seemed so sensual. What made her so vibrantly aware of him, cracking the shallow composure that she usually wore like a coat of armor, leaving her fluttering and emotionally naked? Why did the man attract her so? She was lost in her reverie when Jim knocked, bringing her back to reality with a start. A glance at her watch told her that he was right on time. It was seven o'clock.

When they had finished dinner and savored the last of the bottle of wine, Frankie looked around appreciatively. "This is a cozy place. It has a feeling of privacy, even though there is a full house . . ." Her face went still as the words died on her lips. A flush reached up to brush her cheeks.

"What is it?" Jim's voice was puzzled. His eyes searched the room until they found the cowboy. Wry understanding shadowed his features. "Guess I should've asked who. You don't seem to be able to escape that guy today, do you?"

She shifted uneasily, conscious of the cowboy's eyes as they rested on her face. Her lips tingled as she remembered, and her fingers developed a will of their own and strayed to touch her mouth.

Damn, she exclaimed under her breath. I've got to stop acting like a silly schoolgirl. Determinedly, she tore her eyes away and reached blindly for her wineglass. She lifted it to her lips, then realizing it was empty, set it back on the table. Fool, she chided herself silently. Get a hold of yourself. Don't look at him again. Use a little self-control and . . . But her eyes had a will of their own too. Inexplicably, she found herself meeting his gaze again.

This time his eyes left hers, roaming over her shining hair, exploring her flushed face, and coming to rest on her mouth. The look was as stirring as a caress, and even as he turned his attention back to the fragile blonde seated across from him, Frankie's tongue darted across her lips, soothing the tingling sensation that had risen in them.

She was shaken. He was a complete stranger. Why couldn't she simply ignore him? She tried. When Jim suggested they go on to a local pub, she agreed. As the evening went on, she began to feel a little dizzy from the whirl of music and dancing.

"Hey, aren't you glad you came?" Jim asked softly between dances.

"Sure," she answered with a false brightness.

Jim frowned. "What gives? That doesn't really sound like you. Aren't you having fun?"

"Yes, I'm enjoying myself," she protested, wishing he wouldn't down his drinks so quickly.

"You've spent too long in isolation. With a bit of practice, you will be your old bubbly self in no time."

"You're probably right," she said as she shrugged. "Lead me back out onto that dance floor," she whispered dramatically. "I need all the practice I can get."

Jim didn't hesitate to grasp the opportunity to pull her into his arms and guide her with unabashed closeness around the dance floor.

I guess I asked for this, Frankie thought uneasily as she looked over her shoulder. Her eyes searched the room with a nagging sense of disappointment. Then they came to rest on

the back of a dark head. Suddenly her entire body sprang alert. Her heart performed aerobics for a brief moment before the man turned her way. A stranger! Not the green-eyed cowboy. Fool, she scolded. Admit it. You've been looking for him all evening.

At midnight, the crowd finally started to thin. Jim suggested that they move to a hotel lounge located by the highway. A country rock group from Calgary had come in for the rodeo, and several of the crowd were planning to end the evening there.

The lounge was filled to capacity when they arrived, but they managed to grab a table as its former occupants were leaving. There weren't enough chairs, so Jim pulled her down onto his lap with an air of possessiveness. He feathered moist little kisses over her bare shoulder. She tried unobtrusively to twist away. She acknowledged to herself that he was losing restraint with each drink, and sitting on his lap was adding to the problem. She had to get out of this situation somehow. When the band began to play a polka, she jumped up and took his hand. "Let's dance!" she exclaimed, pulling him onto the floor.

Jim was an accomplished dancer, and he led them through a dizzying version of the dance. When the music stopped, he drew her close, his arm curved possessively around her waist as he waited for the next number. It was the waltz. Eyes hot with desire, he drew her into an intimate embrace, pressing her against the length of his body as they moved.

Frankie tried to loosen his hold and put a comfortable distance between them, but his arms just tightened, drawing her even closer. Oh Lord, I made a mistake coming here with him tonight, she thought despairingly, closing her eyes. Her anxiety was reflected in their depth when she opened them again. She lifted her gaze beyond Jim's shoulder and looked directly into those now familiar, cynical green eyes that had dogged her all day.

The cowboy!

Nothing else seemed to exist for an electrical moment. There were just the two of them, fused by an overpowering current. There wasn't any warmth in his look; rather, a hint of derision. He doesn't approve of me. The realization shocked her, but why? I've never seen him before today. Her heart pounding, her mind in turmoil, she forced herself to look away.

The band played another waltz. Once again Jim pulled her against him, molding her body against the length of his so they moved as one. "Jim, please don't," she protested as she tried to push away. "You're embarrassing me," she hissed against his chest.

Relief surged through her when the band called for a change of partners after they had played a few bars. She turned eagerly toward the hand that claimed hers. Her eyes widened with dismay when she found herself looking up into the face of that cowboy once again.

He drew her into his arms, guided her effortlessly around the floor. When she tried to hold herself aloof, he expertly outmaneuvered her resistance, and she found herself bending and flowing with his every move in perfect rhythm to the music. The hard strength his body moving with hers and the unmistakable aura of virility that emitted from him, stirred an aching response deep inside her. She fought a desire to cling to him and prayed he couldn't sense her turmoil.

"What's your name?" he asked softly as his hand caressed her back beneath the curtain of her hair.

She looked at him, startled. He was an enigma. The signals she picked up from him were confusing. Most of the time he sent out disapproving, angry vibes, yet, now as they danced, he held her closer than necessary and his voice was low and warm, almost seductive.

"You must have a name?"

She tried to clear her mind; free it of the turbulence that ruled it. Her expression was quizzical as she looked up at him. She searched his face for an answer that she couldn't find. Instinctively she decided not to give him any information about herself. "What's your name?" she asked.

He considered her briefly, an amused smile playing on his lips. Then he replied, "Sir Galahad. You know . . . the white knight."

"And is Jetsetter's Lady, the magnificent steed that you ride, Sir Galahad?"

"No, I'm a modern knight. I let the jockey do the work. I just collect the rewards . . . You know, the hugs and the kisses."

Frankie's face flamed. "I felt like an idiot this afternoon. I didn't realize . . . I mean, I didn't know it was you until . . ."

His arm tightened around her. "I assure you, I didn't mind in the least. Quite to the contrary, I rather enjoyed it. All of it." he added, smiling as his eyes rested on her mouth. Her heart stood still when he inclined his head toward her. The music ended, and for a fraction of a moment, they stood poised. Her lips were invitingly parted, her eyes wide and dark with desire as she met the mesmerizing look that he sent her from under half-closed lids.

He bent his head, and she swayed toward him, captivated by a yearning that dulled all senses; except the one that made her aware of him. The tension tightened between them until it snapped. Startled, she realized what was happening. What am I doing? She cringed, embarrassed by the openness of her unconscious invitation. Color scalded her face again and she looked away.

Trembling, she withdrew from the circle of his arms. He didn't resist the movement, but when she turned to go back to her table, he captured her hand and drew her to his side. His hand slid around her waist and stopped to rest firmly over her hip bone, pulling her against him while they waited for the music to start again.

"I want to sit down," she said breathlessly.

"Come now. Your boyfriend can spare me one more dance. I don't like leaving unfinished business," his tone was mocking, and his eyes lingered on her mouth.

She didn't miss the suggestion in his words. In an attempt to ignore his remark about unfinished business, she protested, "He is not my boyfriend."

"No? Well, you'd better tell him then, because he sure seems to think he is, and I can't say I've seen you do too much to discourage the idea. He may realize that you 'buckle bunnies' are all the same and that this is all just a game you play, but I doubt that he does."

Frankie flinched, recognizing the insult in the insinuation. Her eyes mirrored hurt and anger. "That was a despicable thing to say," she whispered hoarsely. "You don't know anything about me. How dare you make such a judgment?"

She jerked away from him, and the movement drew attention to the bruise on her wrist. His hand shot out to grasp her's bringing it up so he could inspect the darkened area. There was questioning regret in his eyes.

"Did I do that this morning?" Her lack of response answered him. "It seems I owe you an apology." He bent to place his lips against the darkened skin. "Can I kiss it better, and will you believe me when I say I am truly sorry? I don't make a habit of manhandling women. It was just that . . ."

Jim's sudden appearance interrupted the conversation. "Come on,

it's time we got out of here." He grabbed her wrist angrily and heedless of her protests, pulled her with him as he threaded his way through the tables to the door.

Once they were outside he turned and jerked her roughly against him. "You're with me tonight. I'm not going to stand by and let some hotshot cowboy take you out from under my nose. I sat back and watched all those years at college when you were engaged to Martin." His voice was hoarse with emotion, and he groaned as he slid his hands down her hips. "I wanted you then. I'm crazy with wanting you now." She could feel the hardness of his arousal straining against his jeans as he rubbed against her.

"Jim, don't." She jerked her head away and avoided the kisses he tried to shower on her face. "Please. I've told you over and over, I don't want this now. Not with you, not with anyone."

"Just tonight. Give me that for now," he pleaded. "I'm not like Martin. Everything will be different with me." His lips captured hers, and his hands roamed intimately over her body.

"Please!" She thrashed her head from side to side as she struggled to free herself. "Don't do this. Spending the night in bed with an old friend is not my definition of fun. You're drunk. Let me go," she begged.

He sneered, "You weren't giving him that kind of a brush-off. A few seconds more and he'd have been kissing you right there on the dance floor. You don't even know him, but you were letting him paw you all over in there. By god, if anyone is spending the night with you, it's going to be me, not some . . ."

His arms were jerked away, and she was roughly spun free of him. Stunned, she looked up into scornful green eyes. "Well, 'buckle bunny'. I guess he misinterpreted your body signals," the words were spat at her.

Turning to Jim, the cowboy said, "Lay low, friend. It would seem that the lady's actions say one thing, while her lips say another." The word 'lady's' was close to an epithet as it spat out from his lips. "Oh, I'll agree she's a beauty, but her kind of beauty is usually only skin-deep. Don't degrade yourself for a 'buckle bunny'. They're seldom worth the misery they bring you."

Jim wobbled and almost fell. "Butt out of our business and stay away from her," he raged as he charged the man like a floundering, wounded

"Lay off friend," the stranger warned as he sidestepped him.

"Damn you," Jim blustered and charged again.

The cowboy swung once, hit Jim solidly and caught him as he fell. He hoisted him neatly over his shoulder and carried him to the corner of the building, where he eased him to the ground.

"Poor bastard," he said savagely. "I didn't want to do that to him, but he's drunk. There is no way to reason with a man in that condition." He glared at Frankie "Are you proud of yourself? You've been leading him on all day. Tomorrow he's going to have to face the fact that he acted like fool. If I hadn't followed you out here, you might have found yourself in a situation you couldn't handle. Quite frankly, I don't know why I bothered. You would've gotten what you deserved."

He whistled loudly, hailing a passing taxi. Unceremoniously he pushed her into the vehicle. He peeled off a bill and told the driver to take her to wherever she was spending the night. Frankie was too stunned to argue. Numbly she told the driver to take her to unit number seven at the Horseshoe Lodge next door.

“I could have walked,” she said wearily, letting herself into her room. She closed the door and locked it with trembling fingers. “How did I ever get into this mess?” she whispered. She walked to the bed and sat down, clasping her arms around herself to ward off the loneliness and cold emptiness that swamped her. For a moment she stared into the mirror, thinking how everything had changed in a few hours. Men, she thought bitterly, I’ve had enough of them. I’m going back to the ranch in the morning.

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Chapter Three

Ollie was sitting at the kitchen table, enjoying a cup of coffee when she arrived at the ranch the next morning.

“What’re you doin’ here girl? I told you to take the weekend off and here you are, back home, one day later. You know how the old sayin’ goes, all work and no play . . . I wasn’t expectin’ you until late Sunday night or even Monday.”

Frankie poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. “One day of the bright lights was enough. I’m glad to be home again. It’s so peaceful here.”

“Peaceful,” he snorted, tipping his chair onto its back legs. “A young’un like you shouldn’t be lookin’ for peaceful things. You should be out there in the thick of it, enjoyin’ life. What about that young fella you were meetin’ at the rodeo? Didn’t he show up?”

“He was there,” she said dully.

“Well, then, what in tarnation are you doin’ back here?” He scowled as he ran a hand over his neatly trimmed beard and let the chair rock forward to rest on four legs again. “The rodeo isn’t over until Sunday evenin’ is it?”

“No,” she said and sighed. The last thing she wanted to do right now was explain to Ollie.

“Well?” he asked, puzzled.

She shrugged. “I enjoyed the rodeo. I used to team rope, and it reminded me of old times.”

“I don’t understand you, girl. Your friend was there, and you enjoyed the rodeo. None of that tells me why you’re home two days early.”

“It’s a long story, Ollie,” she said slowly, her eyes clouding with unhappiness. “Jim and I were in the same class at veterinary college.”

“Vet college! You never mentioned that one before.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. But yesterday there was another guy around,” she said wearily. “I don’t know his name, but I seemed to run into him everywhere. He asked me to dance. Why, I don’t know, because he made it plain that he didn’t like me. He called me a ‘buckle bunny.’”

“A buckle bunny?” Ollie’s chair grated on the floor. “What the hell’s that?”

“It’s a term some of the rodeo guys use to describe girls who hang around the rodeos.” She turned the cup nervously in her hands. “It certainly wasn’t a compliment. And Jim . . .” She shrugged helplessly. “He was jealous because I danced with the cowboy. Things got kind of nasty. The whole thing just sickened me. I guess I’m a coward, but I didn’t want to face either one of them this morning. So I came home.”

Ollie leaned back and contemplated the swirl of smoke that spiraled up from his cigarette. “Well, tell me about the rodeo.”

Her face brightened, and her eyes began to sparkle with interest. "I went through the stables and I saw this gorgeous little filly. I had a feeling about her, so I placed a bet on her. She didn't let me down. Talk about exciting! She was called Jetsetter's Lady. I'd love to have seen her run again today. Her voice was wistful. The guy who called me a 'buckle bunny' owns her."

She didn't notice Ollie's reaction to her words; the barely perceptible start of surprise that he quickly hid as he inhaled on his cigarette again, the muscle that twitched in his cheek. She said, "I don't understand why he thought that." Her brow creased with a puzzled frown. "Men! I'll stick to my animals for companionship from now on." She jumped to her feet, a strained smile brushing her lips. "I'm going back out to the lease to check on my cows."

Ollie put down his empty cup. "Frankie, could you come back here on Tuesday night? I thought I'd take two or three days off. I need to do up a few odds and ends and I'd like to look in on some of my old buddies in town. Besides that, I've got a date with the dentist on Wednesday. Maybe I'll even have time to run out to the farm and pick up our paychecks. That would save Colt the trip out here."

She carried her cup to the sink, then turned back to face him. "I'll be here," she promised. "I'm glad to hear you're going to get away for a few days. I'll bet it's been a long time since you last had time off."

"Aw, this is my home, girl. I like being here. If I get away once a year, that's good enough for me."

Frankie rode during the next two days, enjoying the peace and quietness of the hours spent alone. She came back to the ranch as arranged on Tuesday evening, relaxed and refreshed. Wednesday morning, she smiled with affection as she watched dust puffing up behind the pickup as Ollie drove down the lane to the main road. It would do him good to relax and get away from everything. Still, she understood how he felt. Ollie loved the ranch so much he didn't feel a great urge to get away. His work and everyday life seemed satisfying enough that he didn't want an escape. She turned toward the barn, humming as she went. It was going to be another hot day. The sky was a clear blue, and there wasn't a cloud in sight.

By the end of the day, it was hard to believe it had been that way in the morning. She had been working hard and hadn't noticed the dark, threatening clouds that had formed in record time during the late afternoon. By the time she finished the evening chores, they hung low over the ranch, their darkness shrouding the area oppressively. The air was still and warm and humid. Forked lightning riddled the black sky to the west, and the roll of thunder cannoned through the surrounding coulees.

The Thunder Breeding Hills, she mused as she fanned herself with her hat, appreciating the movement of air as it wafted across her face. The early Indians had called the Cypress Hills that because they thought they were the home and breeding ground of the storms. She lifted her face to the sky. The night was going to be spectacular. It was a good thing that she wasn't afraid of thunder and lightning or being by herself.

When she stepped out of the tub an hour later, a loud clap of thunder rent the air, and within seconds, rain was sluicing down in a torrent. She dried and wrapped a fresh towel sarong-fashion around herself, then stepped back into the bedroom. Shaking her hair loose around her shoulders, she went to stand at the window. She smiled as she watched the welcome drops bounce on the cement walk below. Their pounding rhythm on the roof was

almost exciting, and she was stirred by the sound of it as she ran her fingers through her heavy, damp hair. She turned to pick up the small electric blow-dryer and a styling brush and worked her hair until it floated around her shoulders like a soft, fragrant cloak. Fiery lights glinted off it like sparks borrowed from the lightning that pierced the evening sky.

After spraying herself lightly with her favorite perfume, she pulled on a silky emerald-colored jumpsuit and surveyed herself in the mirror. The material caressed her body with loving intimacy, accentuating her lissome slenderness. The rich green complemented her coloring and gave her skin a luminous glow. "What a shame." She winked at her reflection in the mirror as she dropped a mocking curtsy. "Here I am, all dressed up with no place to go."

She twirled away from the mirror and did a bouncy little dance step down the hall to the living room, where she stopped to put one of her favorite CDs in the player and turned up the volume. She swayed with the beat as she sashayed into the kitchen. Foot tapping, she hummed along with the music while she made herself a salad. She took two pieces of chicken from the fridge and buttered a dinner roll, then went back into the living room and set the plate on the coffee table by the couch.

She was about to sit down when one of her favorite pieces started to play. She hesitated as the music teased her, then she let herself go and began to dance with fluid, sensuous abandon. She discarded all her inhibitions and moved instinctively to a primitively erotic choreography, bending and swaying, stretching and sighing to the rhythm of the music. She wasn't aware of the heady picture she made with her fiery cloak of hair drifting and fanning around her, while her silky jumpsuit moved against her body like a pair of loving hands, caressing and molding here, floating lightly over her curves there, changing with her every movement. She was only aware of the beat that carried her to the last note. Then she sank exhausted to the couch and sighed with contentment.

She was lifting her hair off her damp neck when she sensed another presence in the room. She looked up, expecting to see Ollie. For a second, her mind didn't register what her eyes saw. Her heart suspended in mid-beat; she stiffened. A billion tiny shards of ice prickled under her skin, moving upward along her arms, slipping across her shoulder blades, raising the hair on the back of her neck, and tingling on her scalp. She shivered, then sprang to her feet like a startled cat.

"You!" she gasped as her stalled heartbeat accelerated, pounding as if it would break free of her heaving breasts and flee. "What are you doing here?" Startled fear registered in her face and her voice as she met the sardonic green eyes across the room. He didn't answer.

"Who are you?" she cried, bewildered. Anger flashed through her, interlacing with the fear. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?" she blazed.

"A lot of good it would've done. Do you really think you'd have heard a knock above that racket?" He was using that now familiar, chilling, velvety tone of voice that barely masked the steel edge of anger. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get here? You certainly aren't anything that Ollie would bring here. That only leaves the new fellow—Lamonte."

His voice was hard and cold, but his green eyes seared her. "Ollie swears that Lamonte's the best help he's ever had, but obviously he has one weakness. Damn! Why didn't you move on with your rodeo crowd? Good help is hard to come by, but even a good hand is

trouble when he's constantly got his mind on a hot piece of ass." He strode across the room to face her. "Why in hell couldn't you leave a good man alone?"

Frankie went hot with anger. Blood pounded in her ears, a muscle twitched in her jaw. Her eyes narrowed. Her hands clenched into tight fists, and she lifted her chin, ready to do battle. "I don't know who you are, but you are way out of line. I work here. I have a right to be here, which is more than I can say for you."

"You lying little bitch!" His hand darted out to cup her chin with an iron grip, forcing her face up to his. "I happen to own this place. I know that you don't work here. And now I'm giving the orders. Pack your bags. I'll take you back to Maple Creek myself. Then I'll know you're gone, 'buckle bunny'." He dodged the ineffectual flailing of her fists. He laughed mirthlessly as his hand snaked behind her to grab a handful of silky hair. Tears smarted in her eyes, and he pulled her head back, then jerked her against him in a crushing embrace. Before she could protest, his lips ground against hers cruelly.

"So you want to get physical," he snarled, picking up a phrase from the music she'd been dancing to. "I'll bet your body can talk," he said harshly before he claimed her mouth again.

She struggled, seeking freedom from the crushing arms and the bruising, punishing lips, but it was futile. Gradually, her struggles stilled and she ceased to resist. With her submission, his lips softened. They were no longer punishing, but searching. Her senses reeled as his tongue probed the sweetness of her mouth.

"I knew you were trouble the first time I laid eyes on you," he whispered hoarsely as he pulled her closer. His lips feathered across the angle of her cheek and trailed down her throat. Suddenly he stiffened and then as if he realized what he was doing, thrust her from him.

She staggered, trying to catch her balance against the sudden, unexpected movement, and he let her fall onto the couch. Her expression was bemused as she looked up at him, her fingers pressed against her lips. The meaning of his words began to come to her. Was it possible that this man was her boss? The elusive Colt Thompson? Her large brown eyes slowly filled with tears that she sought to quell. One by one they brimmed over and slipped down her cheeks.

"Don't try the tears act on me," he warned harshly. "It isn't going to work." He scowled and turned away abruptly. "I don't understand Ollie allowing this to happen. He knows the rules. I'm not running a bordello here." He swung back to face her, his body movements stiff and defensive. "Where the hell is Ollie?"

Confused and angry, she raked her fingers through her hair. She sighed heavily. "Ollie went to Swift Current for a few days. I don't expect him back until the weekend."

"What did he go to Swift Current for? He didn't mention it to me." She didn't answer, and he demanded, "Then where the hell is Lamonte?"

She yelled at him in exasperation, "I am Frankie Lamonte!"

He froze and seemed momentarily at a loss for words, then he exploded, "What kind of fool do you take me for? I know Ollie wouldn't hire a woman in the first place, but he had, he would have told me."

"Why wouldn't he hire a woman?" she stormed. "I've worked with livestock all of my life. I'm good at what I do. I keep my mind on the job, which is more than can be said for some of the men around here," she added bitterly. "If Ollie didn't tell you I was a woman,

it was probably because he knew what a chauvinist you are.” Angry spots of color flamed in her cheeks.

He stiffened at her words, his eyes narrowing to angry slits. This little termagant had some nerve, standing here in his house, calling him a chauvinist. His look pinioned her for breathless seconds.

“Let’s just imagine for a moment that what you’re telling me is true,” he sneered icily. “If you are Frankie Lamonte, why would you want a job in an out-of-the-way place like this? It doesn’t make sense. Remember, I saw you in action at the rodeo,” he reminded her with disgust.

“Correction,” she said, blazed, “you saw what you wanted to see. You wanted to believe that I was a sleazy broad, intent on seducing the whole rodeo crowd, and you convicted me without any concrete evidence.” By now she was screaming. “Why did I take a job in an out-of-the-way place like this? I wanted to get away from people like you. Until I went to the rodeo, I managed to do that quite beautifully.” She slammed a cushion across the couch, stood up, and turned toward her bedroom. “I’ll go and pack now. I refuse to be turned out in this rain, but I’ll hitchhike out in the morning, and you can look after your ranch yourself, Mr. Thompson. At least, that is who I assume you are.”

Frankie marched swiftly down the hall, halting automatically when the ring of the telephone shrilled in the tense silence. Let him get it, she thought angrily. I don’t work here anymore. She flung open the door to her bedroom, then slammed it shut behind her, and leaned against it, taking deep deliberate breaths, trying to control her emotions. She was still concentrating on the task when Colt knocked.

“There’s a call for Frankie Lamonte. What shall I tell him?” he asked brusquely.

She considered telling him to say that Frankie Lamonte was not available. That would confirm his suspicions she thought perversely. But it wouldn’t be fair to vent her frustrations on whoever was calling. It could be her parents. She took another deep breath and opened the door. He was standing in the hall, waiting for her response. Glaring, she flounced past him, grabbing the phone as she went.

“Hello.”

“Frankie, is that you?” It was Jim . “Please don’t hang up.”

She groaned, “What do you want, Jim ?” The words were harshly spoken. This evening had been a nightmare, and her association with Jim on the weekend was a major contributing factor to the problem. Knowing that Colt Thompson was listening didn’t help. The nerve of him! She glared at him, willing him to have the decency to move away.

“Frankie, I’d like to see you again sometime.”

“Jim . . .” Her voice filled with exasperation. She took another deep breath and willed herself to think clearly. “I don’t want to see you again. It would be pointless. I told you before, I don’t want to get involved with you or anyone else.”

“Please, Frankie . . .” Jim ’s voice had become plaintive.

“I’m sorry, Jim. That’s how I feel.”

“Who answered the phone?” he asked suspiciously. A jealous Jim was the last thing she needed. She had to get rid of him. “Good-bye, Jim.” She slammed down the receiver. “Men,” she swore under her breath as she closed her eyes and leaned against the wall.

“Are you all right?” Colt’s voice intruded on her thoughts, irritating her even more.

Her eyes flew open to shoot daggers at him. “Oh, I’m just fine, Mr. Thompson. But I’ll be even better tomorrow when I’m out of this place.”

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Author's notes

While I have grown to know them like my children, and laughed, cried, hurt and loved with them, all the characters and events in this book live only in my imagination, and if anything similar exists in real life it is totally coincidental. To my knowledge there is no Thompson Land and Cattle company at Ravenscrag or Cantuar in Saskatchewan, Canada. The ranch and the cattle lease in the story are also fictional.

All the towns and landmarks do exist. I picked them off different maps and wove them into my characters lives because I liked the sound of them, and in my mind's eye their location fit into the story

The Cypress Hills are a well known anomaly and their unique qualities do impact the area. The name Cypress Hills originates from an inaccurate interpretation of the French phrase "montagne aus cypres" used by the French Canadian and Métis people, who came to the area. The term "cypres" referred to the lodgepole pine trees that grew in the hills, which did not grow naturally in the surrounding prairies.

The Cypress Hills are a remnant of land that was bypassed by retreating glaciers during the last Ice Age. Surrounded by vast great plains between the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in Canada, they rise about 1,950 ft above the surrounding ranchland. Sitting at about 4,000 ft above sea level, they are considered to be the highest point in the country between Labrador and the Rockies.

The hills are rich with history, and people have gathered there for thousands of years. During the past century, the hills were part of Canada's "Wild West." The North West Mounted Police came across Canada to bring law and order to the region. They established Fort Walsh in 1875 near the site of the infamous Cypress Hills massacre.

It is reported that the cattle industry started there in around 1879 when the NWMP brought in herds of cattle to feed the people, who were starving in the area because of the depletion of the buffalo herds. The first cattle ranchers in the Cypress Hills settled near the Fort. Ranching is still an active part of the fabric of life in the Cypress Hills.

In 1989, Saskatchewan and Alberta joined forces and created the first Interprovincial Park in Canada. The park consists of two blocks: the West Block and the Center Block. In 2000, it was amended to include the Fort Walsh National Historic Site. Today, the park is a well-developed tourist spot.

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More Reviews

Once I had a chance to sit down and concentrate on reading, I got fully engaged in this book. I read it right through to the end in one sitting, and found that I really did like it. It is an easy read and holds your attention from beginning to end. Darlene Bell, Retired Insurance Adjuster

Once started reading, could not put the book down. Real life-like issues and lessons in a Saskatchewan—Alberta, Canada setting. A “must” read. Donna Rezansoff, Legal Assistant, Calgary, Alberta

A love story should, grab your attention, bring you to your knees, sweep you into the heavens in the sensuous magic of lovemaking, drop you into depths of despair, tantalize your senses with happiness, and sometimes frighten you beyond reason, . . . THIS IS IT, this is the book to carry you on a roller coaster ride of life and love from beginning to end. I loved it and would recommend it to anyone. Musician and avid reader, . . . S. M. Hynes

I’m a guy and I never read love stories, so I was surprised when I started this one and wanted to keep reading. The way it’s written makes you want to keep on going page after page, and it’s pretty sexy in some places too. I only have time to read for a little while when I go to bed at night, but I read way later than I usually do every night until I was finished this book. Sorry—but I want to stay anonymous.

“ . . . it is hard to imagine this novel is this authors first. This story is written from the heart, about a heart. This book has adventure, mystique and an incredible grass roots sensuality. Frankie Lamont is a very classy, “hot blooded”, vibrant young woman—who can not hide from the passion of love, even though that is what she thinks she wants.

The author takes the reader along with this reluctant, but fiery woman, on a journey to a wonderful ending with some tantalizing sensuality along the way. This is a romance novel that makes the reader know they cannot wait to read more . . . what other sensuous scenes and interesting adventures are coming next . . . ?”

Doug Richardson. Consultant, and an avid reader. Doug is also involved with a small publishing company that is currently working on a magazine from Paris, France, as well as other smaller publishing projects.

I have never met the author and love stories are not my kind of reading, but my neighbor had been asked to read this book and give it a book review. She asked me if I wanted to read it because she had really liked it. Truthfully, I found it a little slow at the very

beginning but once I got past that bit I couldn't put it down. I really enjoyed it. I would recommend it to anyone, even people like me who are not really readers of "love stories".
S. Robertson, retired homemaker and an avid reader

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You Can Run

Book 2 in the Trilogy

You Can Run.... the second book in the Thompson Family Trilogy will be released for summer reading 2012

Shauna Lee Holt, Colt Thompson's former fiancée, has taken center stage in "You Can Run....."

Shauna Lee Holt is petite, blonde haired and blue eyed: her blue eyes are her signature and make her recognizable where ever she goes. She is an intelligent, successful, outgoing business woman; a workaholic who owns Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Canada.

But her professional persona is not reflected in her personal life, which is lonely, closed and sterile. She has no intimate relationships: no family and no friends. Life has taught her that intimacy and commitment bring loss and pain: but she still craves companionship and human touch. She assuages her loneliness with the "company" that she brings home on the weekends; men who live for the moment and want no lingering ties.

Then Brad Johnson comes into Shauna Lee's life. He is not like the men she is used to. He sees beyond the surface. He wants what she is certain she cannot give him; love and intimacy.

She has secrets; deeply hidden, painful secrets. She clings desperately to the safety of anonymity: she is afraid to let anyone breach the walls of the facade she has built. She is living a lie to protect herself. She can run....

But can she hide?

“You Can Run.... continues to follow the lives of Colt and Frankie Thompson as their lives intertwine with Brad and Shauna Lee. Frankie and Colt seem to have everything. Their family grows; their relationship deepens. After the birth of their twins and three years of marriage they are still discovering new things about each other; however, during the journey they have to face the fact that even wonderfully happy relationships are sometimes subject painful adjustments that come with the ebbs and flows of life.

This is a story of second chances and unconditional love; a tale of secrets, lies, tormented lives, rage and murder.

I hope you enjoy following Frankie and Colt’s life and Shauna Lee and Brad’s new story in this sequel.

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