

A shirtless man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat with a decorative band is shown from the back and side, looking towards a rodeo arena. In the background, a crowd of spectators is visible in the stands, and a rider on a brown horse is competing in the arena.

**Deirdre
O'Dare**

Cowgirl Up

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...The intensity in Wes's soft words tore at her. He was opening doors she had been stubborn about keeping shut tight. Before she could pull herself together enough to reply, his mouth came down over hers in a hard, hot, urgent kiss. He cupped her butt with one big, long fingered hand and lifted her against the erection straining at his zipper. A gush of moisture flooded her panties as their bodies ground together. Somewhere in the back of her mind a small voice was saying, *Whoa, hold it. This is Wes, for gosh sake. What the blazes are you doing?*

His other hand found her breast through her t-shirt and rolled a nipple under the thin fabric. She whimpered, clutching at his shoulders, tangling her fingers into the thick rusty-blond hair at the back of his neck. As from a distance, she heard footsteps crunching past in the gravel and an amused voice said, "Get a room, cowboy."

That wasn't necessary. They were almost to the camper. Dragging his mouth free of hers, Wes lifted her off her feet. She locked her legs around his lean hips and held on for dear life as he stumbled the last few steps, jerked open the door and thrust her inside. There was no time to unfold the couch that made into a double bed. They fell on it as they tore at each other's clothes...

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COWGIRL UP

BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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COWGIRL UP
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*To a couple of rodeo-crazy girls
who found each other as kindred souls way back
when and built a friendship that has lasted
half a century! Thanks Linda P. for that bond
and years of encouragement. You're one of the sisters my
parents neglected to give me. We didn't get our
cowboys, or at least not the ones we started out looking
for, but that's okay. We can still enjoy them
vicariously through our characters!*

*As ever, thanks to E.J., my wonderful editor,
who catches all my clumsy sentences, missing and extra
commas and weak spots and makes/helps me fix them.
And thanks to Trace for yet another fabulous cover!
As an author I am so blessed to have you both!*

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Tab stood wide-legged, one booted foot braced on each side of the chute. The black-brown back between her heels twitched as one of the other riders fished the end of her rope beneath the bull and poked it up to Tab's waiting hand. She grasped the end and slid it through the loop, drawing the rope tight. The bell gave a harsh clang as the bull shifted.

They called this one Big Trouble. He fit the name, more Brahma than Angus in spite of the dark color of his loose hide. He moved restively, knowing, just as she did, what came next. Slowly she eased down until her butt met the wide back. She gripped the rope tightly with her rosined glove and nodded. *As ready as I'm gonna be.*

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“Cowgirl up,” someone said.

She listened with half an ear to the announcer’s chatter, not believing most of it.

“Glue your eyeballs on chute six, ladies and gentlemen. Tab Conrad is about to make a grand entrance on Big Trouble. This little package of dynamite is a rider to watch, the new kid on the block with Super Glue in her Wranglers. A good ride today will have her in the top ten for the year, and a good ride is what you’re likely to see.”

Big Trouble’s normal pattern had him clear the chute with one prodigious leap before he went into a hard, tight spin. Only trouble was, he didn’t always do the normal thing. She had to be ready for normal, but also for any other trick he might try. The gate swung wide. With a grunting roar, the bull erupted out of the chute. He came down hard on his forefeet, swinging massive hindquarters in a wide arc that had his spine twisting like a wet hemp rope.

Tab rocked with his motions, gripping with her upper thighs, while she managed to inscribe the required arcs with her spurs, shoulder to flank and back again. She waved her free hand high, so the judge could see she wasn’t grabbing anything. Even through her heavy leather glove, the rope bit into her palm as she gripped, holding tight to the only thing between her and a wild flight to the arena’s muddy surface.

Her hat went flying, a pink Frisbee spinning away on the momentum of the bull’s next jump. He made four more of them before he went into his trademark spin. Gaze fixed on the flexing muscles in his massive neck and shoulders, Tab

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forecast his actions instants before he moved.

When he launched into the spin, she was ready, leaning into it just enough to fight the drag of centrifugal force. Each time his forelegs hit the ground, the blow ricocheted upward through her body. It felt like riding a jack hammer. Her butt and thighs would be bruised tomorrow, even though she didn't really bounce. She bit down hard on the mouth guard, feeling her head jerk on her neck from the power of the bull's wild leaps.

The ride took forever. At last, as if from a great distance, she heard the whistle. She let her free arm drop, grabbing the rope with her second hand, too. It was time to bail off, but where was anyone to decoy him away?

Then she remembered. Even with his blunted horns, the black bull was dangerous. Half the clowns were scared of him. He'd even bowled over a couple of horses when some of the ropers and arena men had tried to chivvy him out of the way a couple of rodeos ago. He was one tough customer.

I'm on my own. Wait, no, not quite. There's Wes.

Baggy pants flapping, the lanky clown darted in front of the bull, waved an oversized bandana in front of the beast then dodged away. Lowering his massive head, Big Trouble eyed the darting man. The bull paused for an instant, pawed the ground with one huge hoof, slinging dirt behind him.

She read his actions as her signal to break free. She eased her grip, feeling the rope slide through first her hand and then the loop, dragged by the weight of the bell. When it dropped, her one handle was gone. She pushed down hard with both

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hands on the bull's hump to launch clear.

With Trouble's next leap, she sailed off, briefly floating, only to fall hard on the one patch of arena the plow gang had missed. *Feels like cement or maybe cast iron.* Breath rushed out of her in a whoosh. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw a bright flash as Wes zigzagged past, drawing the bull's attention from her until she could get up. Gasping and gagging, she scrambled in a desperate effort to get her feet under her.

Fighting nausea and a million aches, she staggered upright to make a stumbling dash for the nearest side of the arena. The crowd's roaring applause reached her, a boosting wave of enthusiasm. She'd made a good ride and she knew it, but right now she just wanted to sit on something still, preferably soft. She needed a minute to pull herself together.

Willing hands helped her through the rails. She sank onto the end of a bleacher, blinking back a reddish haze that wanted to swallow her whole.

"Ms. Conrad, care to comment on your ride?"

She glanced up at the voice, wanting to growl a curse. Why couldn't the confounded reporters leave her be? There were a few other women competing in the riding events now. It wasn't as if she was the first or the only one. She might be the smallest and the youngest, but that didn't mean diddly squat to the bulls and broncs. So why did it matter to anyone else?

Hell, I'm just a straggly little tomboy, not a gorgeous chick like most of the barrel racers, the rodeo queens. What makes

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me newsworthy, for God's sake? She caught her breath enough to speak. "I've done better a few times, but he didn't dump me. I'm the first one at this rodeo to ride him to the whistle. See what the judges say."

Gid came up to her then, frowning like a thunder cloud. He stepped between her and the reporters, the microphones. "G'wan, you vultures. Can't you see she's shook up?"

For once, her brother's protective attitude didn't bother her. He might scare off potential dates she wished he'd leave alone, but when he played guard dog with the reporters, she couldn't complain. As the newshounds backed away, he turned to her.

"You okay, Tabby? You hit mighty hard out there."

She nodded. The ache in her chest had eased as she caught her breath and the dizzy red cloud was fading fast. "Yeah, I'm all right. I just had to light on the one hard spot in the whole mucky arena is all. Trouble prob'ly planned it, the mean, ole bastard."

"You gave 'im one heck of a ride anyway. If I heard right, the judges scored you 82, 87 and 89. Not too shabby, kid."

By then the last rider had been dumped, not three jumps out of the chute. The arena cleared to prepare for the next event. Wiggling his lean body through the rails, Wes loped over to join them. Tab glanced up at him, seeing the gentleness in his eyes behind the garish grease paint on his angular face.

Lifting his floppy straw hat to swipe the sweat off his brow, he shook his head. "Had me worried, Little Bit. I

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thought you were going to drive into that ground like a fence post. Wasn't sure Trouble would follow me long enough to let you dig out. You oughta quit this crazy business, go home and have babies."

She summoned a glare. It was an old argument they had every time she rode, especially the bulls. Of course Wes had seen his dad and his big brother die in the arena, both killed by bulls. Those tragedies probably colored his thinking some, but he wouldn't hassle her if she was a boy. Not the way he did anyway.

Tab glowered at him. "You know there ain't no way in Hades I'm going home. Pa would have me in chains until he married me off to one of the ole widowers in his church. Anyway, you're in just as much danger out there playing picador, and you don't have a chance at the big purses."

He shrugged. "Ain't in it for the money, Little Bit. I've just gotta get bulls off a few more riders until the day I quit seeing Dad getting trampled and Todd gored."

The stark pain visible in his eyes for an instant was almost more than she could bear. She liked Wes—a lot. Everybody did. He was just an all-around nice guy, as well as one of Gid's best friends. If things were different, she could more than like him, but as long as he kept bugging her about riding, she didn't think they'd ever get together. Anyway, he was Gid's buddy. And she told the utter truth when she said she'd never go home.

Her dad was a hellfire ranting preacher in a little two-bit church down in the agricultural valley south of River Bend.

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He ranched on the side since preaching didn't pay too well. He also insisted his kids serve as living examples of everything he preached a person ought to be. That meant no dancing, no drinking, and no dating. Damn near no nothing—except work. Always plenty of work. When she turned eighteen, she'd lost no time leaving home.

Since big brother Gideon had chosen the rodeo circuit, she did the same. They'd both learned to ride taming half-wild horses and burros they caught out in the hills, chasing raggedy-assed cattle out of the mesquite thickets and doing the rest of the slave labor required to keep the ranch going while Pa wrote his sermons and counseled his parishioners. He managed to keep Ma pregnant about three-fourths of the time, too, so there were plenty more Conrad kids coming along to replace Gid and Tab.

She reckoned there would be more on the circuit, too, as soon as they turned eighteen. *The twins'll be next. Let's see, gosh, they're sixteen now, going on seventeen.*

Levi and Leah both took after Ma's side of the family. Ma had a good bit of Indian blood, and it showed. The twins were dark instead of blond, like her and Gid. She grinned. An ornery, sassy pair they are, too. *Bet Pa's had to wear out quite a few straps to keep Levi in line. Maybe even a few on Leah.*

"You coming, Tab?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure."

Gid's words recalled her to the present. She got to her feet, dusted off the seat of her pink jeans, then hurried after him and Wes. Both men were over six feet tall. Their long legs ate up

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the ground so fast she almost had to run to keep up. Sometimes she really hated being only five-four.

* * *

It wasn't like Tab was so fond of dancing, but, by golly, now that she had the chance, she wasn't going to sit in the camper she shared with Gid—and sometimes Wes—when there was a rodeo dance in progress. She still felt more than a little clumsy when she got out on the floor, but after the first hour, most everyone was too drunk to care. She told herself nobody was going to be watching the sawed-off cowgirl in pink.

One thing neither she nor Gid did was drink. They'd both tried it a few times, but it seemed like their systems rebelled at alcohol. As far as Tab went, before she got even half a buzz, she'd be in the john puking her guts up. And the next day, she'd still feel like a pile of shit. You couldn't ride in that shape, at least not well enough to win any money. If it was a choice between winning and drinking, no question which would come first with her. She stuck with sodas or virgin whatevers.

By about eleven, she was probably dancing better than most, two left feet or not. She got handed from cowboy to cowboy, most of whom she knew, at least by name and reputation. As the band segued into a waltz, another set of arms snagged her. She looked up to see who it was.

He'd tried to fit in, donning brand new jeans and a garish shirt, but she knew at once this guy was no cowboy. His face

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looked vaguely familiar, too. All at once it hit her. Boyd Daniels, the staff writer from that big sports magazine, the guy who'd been trying everything he could think of to get an exclusive interview.

Shit. Just what I don't need.

"Hello, little lady. You must be right up there on cloud nine after that great ride today. That put you in the finals, didn't it?"

She shrugged negligently. "I s'pose. Haven't figured my totals yet. I know I'm getting close, but whether I made the cut or not with today's ride, I can't say. I'll figure that out when we hit the road to the next show."

"So what makes a sweet, sexy, little number like you get out there in the dirt and shit, and try to ride bulls? Most of the ladies prefer to stay clean and not risk messing up their faces. Running the barrels or ribbon roping is a lot less dangerous."

Tab ignored the heavy-handed flattery. None of those adjectives fit, as far as she was concerned. She damn well wasn't sweet, and she didn't see herself as sexy either.

"Don't have a horse for one thing. Can't afford the kind of mount those events take. Maybe in a few more years, or if I get banged up too bad to keep this up. Right now, it's fun."

"Fun? You're pulling my leg. How can risking your pretty little neck on rough stock be fun?"

Tab grinned. "Ya know, maybe it's just penis envy. It's like I really wanna be a man and that's as close as I can come."

Daniels' jaw dropped for just a second before he got

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himself under control. “Are you saying you’re a lesbian? A lot of women athletes—”

“Did I say that? No, I like cowboys well enough, both in the hay and in the arena. I’ve just always been a tomboy, and since I can ride rings around a lot of the fellows, I figure I may as well play that hand for all it’s worth.” *Whoa, what am I doing? This crap is liable to wind up in print. I thought I’d put him off, but he’s eating it up.*

She wasn’t sure what perverse demon had gotten into her. In spite of weeks of refusal, she was now giving this geek an interview, one that was likely to come back and bite her in the ass if she wasn’t damn lucky. And she was stone cold sober. *Shit.*

As if emboldened by her sassy talk, Daniels was now holding her a little too tight. She could smell liquor on his breath as he leaned down, almost in her face. “Let’s you and me go somewhere a little quieter—where we can talk,” he said, sliding a hand down to curl his fingers suggestively around the right cheek of her ass. He pressed her close enough that she could feel the growing erection straining at the zipper of his stiff new jeans.

“No, I don’t think so.” Tab pulled back, resisting the hold he was tightening on her. *Seems like he isn’t going to take the hint.* She put a little more effort into breaking away. “I said no. Like the song says, what part of ‘no’ are you not getting?”

“Aw, come on, sugar. I can show you as good a time as any of these randy, drunken cowboys. I’ve had cheerleaders from the top NFL teams, a tennis champ, couple of starlets,

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country singers, more rodeo queens than I can remember. How about a bull rider?"

Tab gathered herself. Now if she could pull back just a wee bit more... It would be a high kick, but with a little extra effort she could get a knee where it would do the most good. After that, she didn't think Mister Hot-Dick sports writer would be in any shape to bother anybody for the rest of the evening.

Everything happened at the same time. She swung her leg up, just as a hand settled on Daniel's shoulder and gave him a sharp jerk. He stumbled. She didn't quite connect as solidly as she had intended, but his gasp and muffled groan indicated she'd done some damage.

She looked up to see Wes had come to her rescue. He didn't dance much, but he always hung around. This wouldn't be the first time he'd stepped in when he noticed a girl was having a problem with a guy who wanted to be too friendly. Maybe he watched her the most, but he'd help any cowgirl he thought was about to get into a jam.

"Let's you and me step outside and have a chat," he said, glaring at Daniels. Wes sounded very quiet and not the least bit threatening, but Daniel's face went even whiter.

The reporter had hunched over, his arms locked against his belly. Tab doubted he felt much like walking anywhere. No matter. Wes had a firm grip on the writer's arm and turned him toward the door.

"That's not necessary, Wes," she began, but she was wasting her breath.

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Daniels kind of hopped and stumbled across the floor with Wes pushing him along. Fortunately the dancers had begun to clear as the band stopped playing for a break. She shook her head and headed back to the table where the soda she'd left was probably warm and diluted with melted ice. Gid would likely meet her there, along with a tall, slender, dark-haired woman with whom he'd been dancing.

Tab studied the couple as they approached. When he got there, Gid dragged another chair over and seated his partner. *That's a first. Never saw Gid stick with one partner for more than a dance or two before. Much less act like a real gentleman. What's going on here?*

He turned from the dark woman to Tab and then back. "Ruth, this is my sister, Tabitha. She's a rider, bulls and bareback broncs."

The dark woman smiled. "I know. I've seen her ride. She's good, really good. You must be proud."

He glanced at Tab again. "Tab, this is Ruth Cunningham. Her brother supplied about half the stock here. He's just going into business as a rodeo contractor. We've been talking..."

Tab gave him a knowing grin. "Yeah, I noticed. Hi, Ruth. Glad to meet ya. Do you compete or just watch?"

"Used to compete, but I had to quit. I did barrels for a while and rode bareback some before I found out I have a bone problem. It's kind of like osteoporosis. The doctors told me if I didn't quit, I'd be in a wheelchair before I was thirty. If I wasn't literally a basket case by then, that is. I miss it, but maybe it's a blessing in disguise." Her smile was a little

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wistful, but still genuine. When her glance slid back to Gid, the smile widened.

Tab nodded to herself. If she was reading the signs right, big brother had just acquired himself a lady, and no standard, pasture-variety buckle bunny either. *Maybe he'll back off on me a little if he has something like this to keep him busy.*

She picked up her glass and took a sip of lukewarm, watered down cola. She almost spit it back out, but she was thirsty. The second swallow didn't seem quite so bad. About then, Wes came back. Naturally he'd shed his clown outfit for the dance. In a pair of black jeans and a nice white-on-white shirt, he looked pretty good. He might be a long drink of water, but he had wide shoulders, lean hips, long legs and an athlete's grace when he wasn't playing the clown.

He dragged another chair over, close beside Tab, and sat down straddling it. "I don't think that yahoo will be botherin' you any more for a while, Little Bit. I let him know he was making a nuisance of himself, and he allowed as how maybe he'd head on out."

"Dang it, Wes, you don't have to be my protector. One big brother is more than enough. I got him with a knee in the right spot, and he wasn't going to drag me out of here anyway."

Wes shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I know you're ball-bustin' tough, but he could've hung around outside and grabbed you when you came out, back there in the parking lot somewhere. I know you're tough, but you're also little. A guy could sling you over his shoulder and throw you into a car before you could get the breath to holler."

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She looked squarely at him, meeting the flaring intensity of his smoky blue gaze. Something inside her contracted and then expanded as shivery chills skittered up and down her back. *Wait a minute! This is just Wes Duncan, my brother's best friend. What's this all about?*

She tore her gaze away to study the rings on the small table, marks left by uncounted glasses over the years. All at once she tuned in to the conversation again, just in time to hear Wes reply to whatever Gid had said that she'd missed.

"Don't worry, Gid. I'll see Tab back to the camper. You stay and talk with Ruth as long as you want. I'm about ready to call it a night and I 'spect Little Bit is, too. She made a hard landing out there today."

Tab wanted to protest, to object the night was young and she was barely getting started, but she knew it wouldn't ring true. The aches had begun to set in. Underneath her skin-tight, trademark pink jeans and low-cut matching t-shirt she knew bruises were darkening where her body had impacted the ground. A couple of arthritis-strength painkillers and a soft bed sounded damn good.

No use fighting reality. She rose, bid a polite goodnight to Ruth and Gid, then followed Wes to the door. Outside, he waited for her to fall into step beside him. As they wove through the parking lot to the pickup and camper in the back row, he laid an arm across her shoulders.

It was a pretty late summer night. A quarter-moon shone down from just past the zenith, and a whisper of dust- and desert-scented breeze stirred the air. They strolled at a

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leisurely pace, Wes checking his long strides to fit her steps.

“What if there was another option, Tab, besides rodeoing for a living or going back home with your tail tucked? Would you still want to ride?”

She drew a slow breath and let it out even more slowly. “I don’t know. Guess it might depend on the option. I mean I don’t plan to ride for the next twenty years. I’ve had two good seasons, so I can’t regret a minute of it, but I know I’ve been lucky. No bad accidents so far, but the odds are bound to turn against me in time. But meanwhile, I’m havin’ me a blast, while kind of rubbing Pa’s nose in it. He has to know what me and Gid are doing. Bet he hates every minute of it.” Grinning at that thought, she shrugged. “I haven’t looked much past tomorrow, the next rodeo, the finals at the most. Not sure I want to.”

Wes stopped, halted her and turned her to face him. He had his hands on her shoulders now, a gentle grip, but one she could not seem to break away from. The heat from his hands sank into her body to settle somewhere low in her belly where a sudden urgent quiver began.

“I have a hunch Gid’s going to be making some changes pretty quick. I look to see him and Ned Cunningham going into a joint business as stock contractors. And I’ll bet Miz Ruthie will be part of his future, too. So where does that leave us, you and me?”

A small squeak of alarm escaped before she could control it. *No, I’m not ready for a change. Why can’t things go on just like they are now for a little longer?* “You think? I didn’t

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know it was that far along yet. I mean, so soon?"

"Haven't you been paying attention, Little Bit? I'm thinking it wouldn't be real comfortable to be the fifth wheel there, not for either of us, even if we kind of hooked up, too. Sure we could probably both find some new travel partners, but it wouldn't be the same. And I don't know if I can go on holding my breath every time you come out on a ride, 'specially a bull. But then I think what if I wasn't there and someone else was more worried about his own ass than savin' yours?"

The intensity in his soft words tore at her. He was opening doors she had been stubborn about keeping shut tight. Before she could pull herself together enough to reply, his mouth came down over hers in a hard, hot, urgent kiss. He cupped her butt with one big, long fingered hand and lifted her against the erection straining at his zipper. A gush of moisture flooded her panties as their bodies ground together. Somewhere in the back of her mind a small voice was saying, *Whoa, hold it. This is Wes, for gosh sake. What the blazes are you doing?*

His other hand found her breast through her t-shirt and rolled a nipple under the thin fabric. She whimpered, clutching at his shoulders, tangling her fingers into the thick rusty-blond hair at the back of his neck. As from a distance, she heard footsteps crunching past in the gravel and an amused voice said, "Get a room, cowboy."

That wasn't necessary. They were almost to the camper. Dragging his mouth free of hers, Wes lifted her off her feet. She locked her legs around his lean hips and held on for dear

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life as he stumbled the last few steps, jerked open the door and thrust her inside. There was no time to unfold the couch that made into a double bed. They fell on it as they tore at each other's clothes.

It seemed surreal. Until the last few minutes, Tab had never considered Wes as anything but one of Gid's friends and, through that, a friend of hers. He'd seemed like a gentle guy with quiet strength, another big brother taking care of her—whether she needed and wanted to be protected or not.

All at once he'd transformed into a sexy man who was hot for her body and had her turned on like a five hundred-watt bulb. She ought to slow down and try to figure out what was going on, but she was just too damned sizzling.

She heard the popping sounds as the snaps of his shirt came open, the metallic clash as their belt buckles hit and grated. They writhed together on the couch, legs hanging off, entangled, boots skidding on the slick floor. Cloth ripped as something caught on her tank top until it tore free. Zippers grated down. Boots clattered to the floor. Then skin on skin, flesh on flesh, and heat to heat.

Finally.

Tab reached down to grasp Wes's cock, briefly startled at the size as she wrapped her fingers around him. *Mercy, he's hung like a bull!* Sliding over her bare skin, his hands were scorching and urgent, yet the touch remained gentle. Careful, as if he were determined not to hurt her. The abrasion of his strong hands, toughened by ropes, hay bales and hard work, excited her more than irritated. He palmed a breast, then slid

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his hand down across her belly, twining his fingers into the silky blond pelt between her legs.

He was so completely male, so different from her in every way. They might both be riders and rodeo people, but that was at another level. Right now they were elemental male and female, contrasting and complementing halves of a whole that worked urgently toward a total fusion.

He rubbed between her legs, parting the pale gold hair that sheltered her pussy. Slowly he eased a finger into the slit, gliding it along to spread the slick moistness that seeped from her body. Even there, on her most tender skin, the roughness of his did not abrade, but tantalized, awakening nerves to an edgy, new awareness.

Her breasts, sensitized with arousal, thrust against his warm chest. She reveled in the tickle of the soft hair on his body, the contrast of that to her own silky skin. Everything felt perfect. It was all new and yet as right as if she'd been here a thousand times before.

She wasn't a virgin, but her experience was a lot more limited than she wanted people to think. Rodeo girls had a reputation to uphold, a name for being as bold, brassy and bawdy as the cowboys. Tab had lost no time in shedding as much of the sweet, chaste preacher's daughter image as she could. But with Gid and Wes protectively close, not too many cowboys dared to go too far, even the randiest of the lot. A couple of times she'd gone alone to compete in an all-girl rodeo, which gave her a chance to do a little solo partying, but even that only accomplished so much.

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This was not going to be a back seat quickie or a wall-bang out back at a rodeo dance. Wes clearly knew what he was doing and he seemed to be really good at it. Where in the world has he learned to love this way or did it somehow come natural?

He kissed her mouth, then spread butterfly kisses across her face, trailed his tongue along the rim of her ear and lapped at the hollow of her throat. All the while his deft fingers explored her, stroking and thrusting, brushing her clit with a touch as soft as a new foal's nose, yet as intense as a stock prod's shock. She bucked at that touch, a gathering storm building inside her.

Her hands flew over as much of him as she could reach, learning the shape and texture of his lean body, the way he quivered when she hit a sensitive spot. She scratched lightly over his small, flat nipples, heard him gasp and felt them bud and stiffen to her touch.

He sighed out a rough breath. "Good Lord, Little Bit. Slow down! You're so perfect, baby girl, so wonderful. I've watched you and wanted you. I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't help myself. You're Gid's sister and he's my best friend, so I've tried to do what's right, but I can't wait any longer. God forgive me, but I just can't."

He nudged her legs wider with one of his before he lifted himself onto his knees, one hand still toying with her. "I don't want to hurt you. You're so small. I'm not the first, am I? Please don't tell me I'm gonna bust your cherry. I don't know how I could stop now, but that would kill me."

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“No, no. I’m not a virgin, Wes. Come on, what rodeo girl’s a virgin? I’ve been on the circuit for two years, for Pete’s sake. Come on and do it. Fuck me. If you don’t, I’m gonna catch fire.”

With one swift thrust he impaled her, sinking into her to the hilt in that drive. They both moaned aloud as he stretched her and she involuntarily squeezed him, adjusting to being filled completely. It hurt, but it was a good hurt. *No, a wonderful hurt.* She lifted her legs and locked them around his hips, holding on as she would to a bull, every muscle tense and every sense focused on the man between her legs. She clutched at his sweat-slick back, her fingers digging into the shifting muscles that flexed as he withdrew to her brink, only to thrust into her deeply once again.

From some floating place about a mile high where sensations had sent her, she sensed vague thoughts come and go. *Oh man, sex never felt like this before. What’s different? Why?*

But she already knew—because this was Wes, not just some horny cowboy she’d hooked up with at a dance. *That was fucking. This is something else, something as spectacular as Wes is special. I always felt like he was meant to be more to me, but I never thought I could bridge the gap and become anything but Gid’s kid sister to him.*

From that point on, they rocked together in a dance that escalated to a faster and wilder rhythm. It took them both up in the dizzy spiral of a hawk riding the thermals, vanishing into the sun-splashed endless sky.

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Tab saw fireworks inside her closed eyes, erupting flowers of glowing colors, as the stretched-rope tension let go. The spasms rippled down through her channel, squeezing and releasing until Wes groaned. She felt the spurt of his climax inside her as her own quivering began to fade. He collapsed against her for an instant before he rolled them together to lie face to face.

For several minutes neither spoke as they let taxed hearts slow to a normal beat and lungs gradually gather enough air again. Their overheated bodies began to cool. As the sweat dried, a sensation of chill set in. Tab shivered, already half asleep. She burrowed closer to Wes's warmth. He shook out the old afghan that hung over the back of the couch and spread it across them. Gathering her even closer into his arms, Wes held her. Wrapped in a circle of secure, loving comfort, Tab relaxed into dreams, even though one she'd hardly recognized she held had just come true.

* * *

Tab awoke in the first pale blush of dawn. She was alone on the couch, the afghan tucked snugly around her bare body. She moved slowly, feeling the lingering stiffness from both her hard ride in the arena and the second one with her unexpected lover. That memory brought a smile that faded when she realized he was not there. Why had Wes left? Did he regret it already, or fear Gid would come and find them?

A gnawing need for coffee and a pee got her up. She dragged the afghan off to wrap herself in while she staggered

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across to the tiny bath built into the camper. The first need taken care of, she dumped grounds into the coffee maker, added water and plugged it in. While the machine burbled and grumbled, she gathered up her scattered clothes. Later she'd need a shower, but first things first. Besides her tank top, jeans, panties, socks and boots, she found Wes's underwear and one sock. He must have dressed in the dark and been unable to find everything.

Semi-dressed, she poured a cup of coffee and sank back onto the couch to think about everything. With a sigh, she shook her head. Until she saw Wes today, she really wouldn't be sure what last evening had been about. Maybe just a lust attack. He'd admitted he'd wanted her for a long time. She'd never guessed, but looking back, there had been plenty of hints. Wes just wasn't a talker.

Did Gid know or at least guess? She knew guys talked, but probably not about the sister of one of them. Gid had more or less sent them off together last night. Had he meant for something to happen, or did he just expect Wes to see her safely to the camper and then go off somewhere else? Normally she bunked in the bed up over the truck cab, and Gid slept on the couch. If Wes was with them, they folded the couch out or slept on the floor. Sometimes they all went to a motel, but if money was tight, the camper gave them adequate shelter.

The click of the camper door opening startled her out of her reflections. Wes stood there, balancing a Styrofoam tray with two sticky pastries and two cups of coffee. His eyes went

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wide when he saw she was up.

“You’re awake. I figured you’d prob’ly sleep longer.”

All of her ill-at-ease feelings surfaced, shaping themselves into anger. “No shit. People do wake up. I’m used to early hours. When you weren’t here, I wondered where you’d gone. You could’ve left a note or something.”

“Too dark when I got up. I didn’t want to bother you, but I couldn’t sleep and got up. I didn’t think we had much coffee left, so I went and got some.”

He put the tray down on the counter, within reach for both of them, before he sat down beside her, not quite touching.

The bruise on the shoulder she’d landed on was dark now, livid against the pale pink of her sleeveless top. Above the scalloped edge of the neckline, a reddened patch showed where his stubble had abraded her skin. His gaze swept over her, and she could see he was taking in every mark and shadow.

He shook his head. “Land sakes, Little Bit, I forgot all about you getting banged up with that bull yesterday. Then I had to go and add my marks, prob’ly all over you. I’m sorry. I had no right, no business doing that. I can’t even plead being drunk, unless maybe on you.”

He looked so woebegone she couldn’t even pretend to be angry any longer. “Cowgirls are tough. The bull didn’t hurt me much and you sure didn’t, cowboy. So quit the groveling. It isn’t your color.”

He looked at her for a long moment, something so powerful it was almost frightening in his gaze. “We’re

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heading out to Red Bluff after the last go-round today. I figured we could swing by Reno and find us a wedding chapel. I mean after last night..."

"What do you mean, 'after last night'? Do you think I have to marry every guy I've gone to bed with? Come on, man. You're not talking good sense. Why should we get married?"

"Well, Gid is going to know something happened between us. What's he going to think?"

Tab snorted. She was getting up a good head of steam. The direction this conversation was going did not feel comfortable at all. It smacked of guilt and sin and all the crap she'd heard way too much of most of her life.

"Unless you tell him, how's he going to know? Did he come over last night and catch us in the act? I expect he spent the night with Ruth Cunningham. Whether her brother knew or not, I don't expect them to get married this week!"

Wes started to say something, a flush spreading under his tan. Tab cut him off without any hesitation.

"Now that I think about it, you were still talking about me quitting riding, weren't you? I guess if we were married, you'd put your foot down and be the heavy-handed man of the house. That's what this is all about, isn't it? Anything to get me off those bulls, right? Well, bull to you too, buster. I'm outta here. Tell Gid I'll be back for my stuff later, before time to pull out. I'm finding me another ride."

Before she had time to regret it or think about how wonderful she had felt making love with Wes just a few hours ago, Tab bolted out the door. It had been making love, not just

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fucking, or so she'd thought at the time. It had been the most special, the most amazing sex she'd ever had. She'd thought it was because there was a real and powerful bond forming between them. Now she wasn't sure. Maybe he had simply been trying to screw her out of her freedom. Maybe Gid had even put him up to it, wanting to be sure she was taken care of if he was going to bail and take up with the Cunninghams. The more she thought about it, the madder she got. It was a good thing she didn't have to ride today. She'd have either turned in a fantastic performance or bombed out completely.

* * *

Tab traveled to Red Bluff with Sylvia Morales and Jessie Pardee. Some people said the two women were lovers, but Tab couldn't be choosy at this point. She really didn't care what their reputation or their relationship was. Both were tough competitors, not big on partying, and they welcomed her with courtesy, especially when she volunteered to kick in a good chunk of change for gas.

They made the trip in about eighteen hours, driving straight through. It wasn't hard with three, taking turns with one person sleeping in the camper, while one kept the driver company. That way things weren't too crowded, even though the gals' pickup was not a king cab. Tab appreciated the fact neither Sylvia nor Jessie asked her any embarrassing questions. They seemed to sense she was down on cowboys right now, especially a couple who were her normal travel mates.

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The real rodeo didn't start until Friday, but for the events with the most competitors, they held a go-round on Thursday with empty stands. Bull riding was too popular with the fans to be included in that, though. Tab spent two idle days puttering around the rodeo grounds, trying not to look for Gid's camper or watch for Wes to appear. Gid was signed up to ride, and she was pretty sure Wes had a clowning contract for the show, but she told herself their plans were none of her concern.

She went over her own gear, helped out wherever an extra pair of hands were needed, and hung out with some of the people she knew from her two years on the circuit. Still there was too much time to think, to argue with herself over her impulsive flight, and to wonder if she'd made the right move or not.

Well, I can't afford to get my bloomers in a knot over things with a big ride coming up. This one will make it or break it for me. I'm barely in the finals, and a good score will cement my place, but a bad one could cut me out. If I can make the finals and do well, I might think about quitting, at least the bulls. I'd prob'ly have enough then to try something else, maybe even get me a good barrel or ropin' horse, a truck and trailer.

* * *

Finally Friday came. For her first ride, Tab drew Monster Mash. He was a showy buckner, but not real tricky to ride. With any luck at all, she could get a good score on him. She spent

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the morning getting herself psyched up for the ride. She did notice Gid had arrived, although she saw no sign of Wes. *Just as well, I don't need to waste time thinking about him.*

Dressed in her favorite pink jeans, she climbed up on chute five to get ready. Monster was dark red, an Angus mix of some kind, with massive near-white horns, sawed off blunt. He snorted and shifted as one of the other riders fished her rope up to her. She gave her glove a final scrub of rosin and settled onto the bull's hot back. As usual, the announcer made a big production of her ride.

Damn, you'd think I was the only girl to ever ride a stupid bull! Well, let's show 'em what we can do.

When she nodded, the chute gate swung away. Monster hesitated just an instant, then lunged out into the open arena. The bell clanged under his belly as he dropped his head and slung his hind end up and around. Half running, but still swapping ends fast enough to make it a challenge to stay on top, the bull roared down the arena.

Tab held hard to her rope while she waved her other hand high and swung her spurs from stem to stern along the bull's sides. She had a scary moment when he slid in a muddy spot and almost lost his footing, but he caught himself and kept going. The whistle sounded, far away but clear. She pushed down hard with both hands and launched herself free. For several bucks, Monster didn't seem to miss her.

Tab lit running, but the arena had a lot of muddy spots. She slipped and slid as she headed for the nearest fence, still several yards away. This bull didn't have a bad reputation for

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attacking riders, so she wasn't too concerned even though she hadn't seen a clown. She heard the final clang as the bell pulled her rope from the bull.

Hope someone will collect it for me.

It was a task the clowns frequently managed.

The collective gasp from the stands got her attention. The bull must have been having a bad day. She glanced back just in time to see a ton of brick-red bovine bearing down on her. It was going to be a very tight race. *I might make it to the fence in time if I don't slip.*

She put everything she had left after the ride into those last desperate strides. She could feel hot breath on her back as she launched herself toward the top rail. Dang fence seemed impossibly high to a five-foot four-inch cowgirl. Somehow she got one heel over the rail in a good imitation of a high jump.

Helpful hands clutched at her, grabbing arms, chaps, anything they could reach. They managed to drag her on up and over. The heavy chain link wire groaned as the bull hit the fence. The two closest posts shuddered but held. The bull bounced back as Tab spilled down in a heap, the impact throwing her to the ground. She lay there for a minute, pain stitching her side as she gasped for breath. Then the shock set in. *That was too damn close! Where's the freakin' clown?*

Shivering violently, Tab struggled to her feet. Somewhere in the distance she heard the announcer give her scores: 88, 92 and 86. That was her finals insurance. She'd made a good ride, but the aftermath had almost put an end to her progress. For a

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minute, a sickening vision of her body forced through the mesh of the wire as the bull's massive head bore down on her played in her mind. She fought back an urge to puke as she shook her head, hoping to make that scene go away.

If Wes had been here, that would have never happened. She tried to depersonalize it, but even so, her realization of how much a bull rider depended on a good clown hit her hard. All at once she really needed to know where Wes was. If he wasn't going to be there tomorrow, she wasn't sure she could get on her second bull. There were a couple of other clowns she had almost as much faith in, but Wes took care of her—of all the riders, but especially of her. He always had. But would he still be willing to do it after the tongue lashing she'd dished out? If he was around, it might be a good idea to try to apologize.

For the next two hours, Tab wandered the length and width of the rodeo grounds. Everywhere she went she asked if anyone had seen Wes. A few people said he'd been by earlier, but most of them had not seen him. *He's supposed to be clowning, I know, and Wes is nothing if not reliable. So what's wrong?*

A sick, niggling suspicion began to gnaw in her belly. She'd been pretty hard on him. What if he did care about her, just wasn't sure what to say or how to say it? Could she have hurt him badly enough to drive him to do something stupid? *Aw, shit. Girl, you need to learn to curb your tongue and check your temper.*

Finally, when her patience was seriously frayed and her

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worries had become a full fledged stab of anguish, she found Gid. He was back of the stock pens with Nick Cunningham. She poked him in the ribs before he noticed her. He wheeled to face her, scowling until he saw who it was.

"Tab, what the hell are you doing? I missed your ride. How'd it go?"

"Ride went fine, but getting out of there afterwards almost didn't. I drew Monster Mash. He never goes after riders once they're down, but he decided to today. I just got over the fence in time." She shuddered at the memory. It had been way too close.

Gid frowned. "Aw, sis, that's a bummer. Where was the stupid clown? What was Wes thinking, not being there to take care of you?"

"I don't know where the clown was. And far as I can find out, Wes isn't here."

Gid's sandy eyebrows shot up two notches. "Didn't you and him come out together? I saw the camper last evening, parked down in contestants' row and figured you guys had gotten in."

"I thought you drove it, and he came with you. Did he tell you what happened?"

Gid shook his head, a frown deepening vertical creases at the bridge of his nose. "No. Is there something I need to know? I rode out with Nick and Ruth. We were talking business, and it was just easier that way. I haven't seen Wes since you two left the dance at River Bend."

Tab hesitated. *How much should I tell him? He might get*

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all protective and big-brother on me and I don't want to mess up his and Wes's friendship that way. She sighed. "We had an argument. He laid into me about quitting riding and suggested we stop off in Reno and get married on our way out here. I told him not only no, but hell, no, and left. I rode out with Sylvia and Jessie."

Gid scowled a moment, studying the toes of his scuffed boots. Tab fidgeted, waiting to see how he'd respond. "Aw, hell. He told me he wanted some private time to talk to you, but I didn't think it would come to that, not yet. Sis, the guy's loco about you. You ought to know that by now, and you could do worse."

She opened her mouth to protest as he held up a hand, shaking his head.

"Let me finish. He ought to know better than to lean on you about your riding, though. I always thought it was mostly a joke...well, that and his feelings about his dad and brother. He knows you're hard-headed as any Missouri mule. Still, you ought to cut him some slack, Tab. You know he isn't good at talking, getting his ideas and feelings out in words. He's afraid of losing you, too."

She felt steadily smaller and meaner as Gid's words sank in. *Yep, I screwed up big time. I gotta find the guy and fix things between us. Not to say I want to get hitched right now, but give him some hope. Maybe tell him I might quit bulls after the finals this year...*

Tab nodded. "I gotcha. I still need to find him, tell him I want him there the next ride I make—tomorrow. This business

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today shook me up. It was close, really close. I could feel the big booger's breath on my neck when I made that my wild jump for the top rail. There were hands waiting to grab me or I'd never have made it."

"I'll tell him you're hunting him if I see him. You might go check the camper."

"I went by once but no one was there. I'll go back, I guess."

Gid patted her shoulder. "It'll work out, kid, if it's meant to. And I think it is."

She gave a dispirited shrug. "I guess." Then she turned away to start back toward the parking area. As she made her way between the two rows of tightly packed pickups, trailers, campers and vans, she heard a couple of voices. They sounded angry, but like they were trying to keep it quiet. Curiosity got the better of her. She ducked between two horse trailers to look behind the parked vehicles where the sounds came from. Rather than barge into the middle of something, she stopped to peek around.

Wes had another man, a guy in rodeo clown garb, by the throat, pinned against the back of a trailer. "You filthy, yellow, chicken-shit sorry excuse for a man! What the hell were you doing, cozying up with some buckle bunny behind the chutes while a rider needed help? I ought to kick the dog turds out of your sorry ass. Its no thanks to you that Tab made it over the fence. If she hadn't, I swear I'd have killed you already."

The shorter man had begun to turn pale, hardly able to

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speaking. He flailed awkwardly, struggling against Wes's iron grip. "I—I— That bull never goes after riders. How was I to know?"

Wes let off another string of the foulest language Tab had ever heard him use. "Any bull can turn on a downed rider, you dumb fucker. You're getting paid to be out there and lure them away. You told me you wanted to take it today and I let you. I was hung over bad enough I knew I couldn't do a good job."

Wes hung over? Now that's a first. He never drinks any more than Gid and I do. Wow, he must have been really upset!

As Wes drew his arm back and doubled his fist for a knock-out blow, Tab knew it was time to intervene. She flew across the ten feet or so to grab him by the arm.

"Wes, no, that's enough. More than enough. I'm okay. I didn't get hurt. Chill out!"

At first she thought he was going to shake her off and hit the other guy anyway. Instead, he drew a deep breath, lowered his arm and then released his hold on the pale-faced clown's neck.

"Get outta here while I'm willing to let you go," he growled, "and don't cross my path again for the rest of the day at least." The other man staggered until he found his footing and then scurried away like a scared lizard.

Wes turned to face Tab, his eyes harder and colder than she had ever seen them. He took another deep breath and folded his arms across his chest with exaggerated deliberateness. "I don't think I have anything to say to you, Tabitha Conrad. So unless you have something to say to

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me...”

“But I do, several things. First, I’m sorry. You pushed every one of my hot buttons the other morning until my temper got the best of me. I wasn’t nice and I regret that. I wish we could go back and do the whole day over.”

Wes lowered his hard gaze. His shoulders sagged as he exhaled in a long sigh. “I know, Tab. I know. I didn’t go about it right. But I’m just so damned scared of losing you, too. You—you’re so spunky and brave and fierce, but you’re little.”

He shook his head, blinking hard as if he had dust in his eyes. “My dad was a big man, six-two and close to two-fifty, but he was no match for a bull. My brother was my size, tough as rawhide, but he wasn’t either. Dad wasn’t even riding anymore. He’d gone into roping, but when he saw that bull go after a downed rider, he went in to help. They were both killed.

“Todd should’ve quit right then but he had too much pride. I was there when he bought it, my first season. I just rode broncs, but I saw him fall, saw the bull turn and come back after him. That’s when I knew I had to become a clown and save as many cowboys as I could. Never counted on cowgirls, too, ’specially one I love with all my heart, though. That’s hell right here.”

“You do? You love me?” Tab could hardly believe what he’d just said. Even though it had been in his hands, in his kisses, in his loving, she hadn’t really believed. She grabbed for him, clenched both hands around his nearest forearm.

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He nodded slowly. “Guess it doesn’t matter to you, but yeah, I do. Maybe I should’ve told you. Would it have made any difference?”

It was her turn to look at the ground. “I think so. I—well, if you’d be willing to compromise. I was thinking. I could quit the bulls after this year’s finals. I’ve invested too much to miss that chance, though. If I even place, I’ll take away enough money to get me a good barrel horse and maybe an older pickup and trailer. I’m not sure I’m ready to get married just yet, but maybe pretty soon. I’ll think about it anyway, and I sure won’t let anyone else get past you in the line to ask.” She glanced up at him through her lashes, a sly grin starting to twitch her lips.

A slow smile worked its way across his face until it reached his eyes, warming them. “You dang little imp. You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

She shrugged. “Maybe a little bit.”

“You need to be anywhere for the next hour or two?”

His eyes were getting hotter every second. Looking up at him, she felt a matching heat kindle low in her belly. The night they’d shared came back in vivid detail. Everything he’d done had made her feel so good, so right. She wanted to feel that way again.

“Not really. Do you have something in mind?”

He caught her arm and almost dragged her down the row to the familiar camper. “I think we need to continue this discussion in a more comfortable place.”

The door hadn’t slammed behind them when he caught her

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close in a fierce embrace. Her toes only brushed the floor as he lifted her into a ravenous kiss, plundering her lips with his, forcing her mouth open to accept the urgent thrust of his tongue. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't move, but it was all right. She was in Wes's arms and he loved her.

At last he raised his head enough to speak. "I figured I'd lost you for good. You were so mad I could swear sparks were shooting out of your eyes and smoke coming from your ears. You're a tiger when you're mad, Little Bit. I knew I'd blown it and I wanted to die."

He gave his head a rueful shake and then winced as if it hurt. "I've been drunk ever since, except the two days I was driving up here. I couldn't wreck a trunk I only own half of. First time I've hit the booze that way in years. But that's why I let that jerk Toby McClanahan take the clown spot today. I was too sick to get out there, but he's worthless. I was standing back by the stock pens and saw what happened. He was out smooching some redhead in painted-on jeans behind the chutes, when he should've been there to keep that bull away from you."

She dragged one arm free and reached up to press her fingers to his lips. "It's okay, Wes. I'm okay. Nothing bad happened. It might have been close, but I made it."

"It would have been my fault, though. That's why I was so mad."

"No, it would've been my own fault. But it doesn't matter...it's over and done, no harm done. Come on, cowboy. Get naked. This cowgirl needs some loving from a very

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special guy. I need it bad and I need it now.”

He stared at her in shock for a few seconds. Then a huge grin spread across his face. When he didn't move fast enough, she went to work, popping the snaps on his shirt, releasing his belt buckle and dragging down the zipper on his Wranglers. As he teetered, jeans falling down over his boot tops, she gave him a shove. He fell back onto the couch, a comical expression of surprise shaping his face. His cock felt no confusion, though. It sprang up stiff as a fence post in mere seconds.

Watching that, Tab dragged her t-shirt over her head, flicked the catch of her bra open and shoved down her jeans in record time. She kicked her boots off, and hopped free of her jeans. Then she moved to straddle Wes's lean hips.

For a moment she teased him, eluding the eager questing of his cock. She didn't need any more time to get ready herself. She was already slick and eager, but it was fun to see the power she held over this big, strong cowboy. As he captured both her breasts in his work-worn hands, she let herself sink down onto him. Her pussy clenched in delight at the pressure of that big cock, reaching, thrusting, filling her completely. Bulls might come and go, but this was her man, her cowboy and she was going to make it the ride of her life.

“Cowgirl up,” she sang out, laughing. “Show me what you've got, big guy! I think this is going to be a real championship ride.”

And it was.

DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes milder (roughly PG-13 rated) romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. Writing came naturally to Deirdre/Gwynn, who scribed her first simple verse at age eight. An avid reader, she devoured hundreds of books while growing up and later as an adult. Somewhere along the way she found romance and then romance with more explicit and detailed love scenes. "Ah ha," said she, "I think I have found my niche!" In the last decade after leaving her "day job" as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army, she finally settled into romantic fiction writing as a second career. Deirdre has a growing number of shorts and novellas, all published by Amber Heat.

With Irish and Welsh ancestry on both sides of her family, Deirdre has always been enthralled by the history and customs of the Celtic peoples as they have come down to us. The Mother Goddess idea particularly resonates with her as well as the notion that physical expressions of love between consenting couples are both a divine gift and a sacred duty to honor the Mother. Deirdre admits her favorite heroes are cops, cowboys and Celts.

* * *

***Don't miss Journal Of A Timid Temptress,
by Deirdre O'Dare,
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