

CHAPTER ONE

THE WEATHER JUST plain sucked, but that was okay with Drake Carson. In his opinion, rain was better than snow any day of the week, and as for sleet...well, that was wicked, especially in the wide-open spaces, coming at a person in stinging blasts like a barrage of buckshot. Yep, give him a slow, gentle rainfall every time, the kind that generally meant spring was in the works. Anyhow, he could stand to get a little wet.

Here in Wyoming, this close to the mountains, the month of May might bring sunshine and pastures blanketed with wildflowers—or a freak blizzard, wild enough to bury cattle and people alike.

Raising his coat collar around his ears, he nudged his horse into motion with his heels. Starburst obeyed, although he seemed hesitant about it, unusually jumpy, in fact, and when that happened, Drake paid attention. Horses were prey animals and, as such, their instincts and senses were fine-tuned to their surroundings in ways a human being couldn't equal.

Something was going on, that was for sure.

For nearly a year now, they'd been coming up short, Drake and his crew, when they tallied the

livestock. Some losses were inevitable, of course, but too many calves, along with the occasional steer or heifer, had gone missing over the past twelve months.

Sometimes, they found a carcass. Other times, not.

Like all ranchers, Drake took every decrease in the herd seriously, and he wanted reasons.

The Carson spread was big, and while Drake couldn't keep an eye on the whole place at once, he sure as hell tried.

"Stay with me," he told his dogs, Harold and Violet, a pair of German shepherds from the same litter and two of the best friends he'd ever had.

Then, tightening the reins slightly, in case Starburst took a notion to bolt instead of skittering and sidestepping like he was doing now, Drake looked around, squinting against the downpour. Whatever he'd expected to see—a grizzly or a wildcat or even a band of modern-day rustlers—he *hadn't* expected to lay eyes on a lone female. She was just up ahead, crouched behind a small tree and clearly drenched, despite the dark rain slicker covering her slender form.

She was peering through a pair of binoculars, having taken no apparent notice of Drake, his dogs or his horse. Even with the rain pounding down, they should have been hard to miss, being only fifty yards away.

Whoever the lady turned out to be, he wasn't giving her points for alertness.

He studied her as he approached, but there was nothing familiar about her. Drake would have rec-

ognized a local woman. Mustang Creek was a small community, and strangers stood out.

Anyway, the whole ranch was posted against trespassers, mainly to keep tourists on the far side of the fences. A lot of visiting sightseers had seen a few too many G-rated animal movies and thought they could cozy up to a bear, a bison or a wolf and snap a selfie to post on social media.

Some greenhorns were simply naive or heedless, but others were entitled know-it-alls, disregarding the warnings of park rangers, professional wilderness guides and concerned locals. It galled Drake, the risks people took, camping and hiking in areas that were off-limits, walking right up to the wildlife, as if the place were a petting zoo. The lucky ones got away alive, but they were often missing the family pet or a few body parts when it was over.

Drake had been on more than one search-and-rescue mission, organized by the Bliss County Sheriff's Department, and he'd seen things that kept him awake nights, if he thought about them too much.

He shook off the gruesome images and concentrated on the problem at hand—the woman in the rain slicker. Wondered which category—naive, thoughtless or arrogant—she fell into.

She didn't appear to be in any danger at the moment but, then again, she seemed oblivious to everything around her, with the exception of whatever it was she was looking at through those binoculars of hers.

Presently, it dawned on Drake that whatever else

she might be, she *wasn't* the reason his big Appaloosa gelding was so worked up.

The woman seemed fixated on the wide meadow, actually a shallow valley, just beyond the copse of cottonwood. Starburst pranced and tossed his head, and Drake tightened the reins slightly, gave a gruff command.

The horse calmed down a little.

Once Drake cleared the stand of cottonwoods, he stood in the stirrups, adjusted his hat and followed the woman's gaze. Briefly, he couldn't believe what he was seeing, after days, weeks and months of searching, with only a rare and always distant sighting.

But there they were, big as life; the stallion, his band of wild mustangs—and half a dozen mares lured from his own pastures.

Forgetting the rain-slicked trespasser for a few moments, his breath trapped in his throat, Drake stared, taking a quick count in his head, temporarily immobilized by the sheer grandeur of the sight.

The stallion was magnificence on the hoof, lean but with every muscle as clearly defined as if he'd been sculpted by a master. His coat was a ghostly gray, darkened by the rain, and his mane and tail were blacker than black.

The animal, well aware that he had an audience and plainly unconcerned, lifted his head slowly from the creek where he'd been drinking and made no move to run. With no more than a hundred yards

between them, he regarded Drake for what seemed like a long while, as though sizing him up.

The rest of the band, mares included, went still, heads high, ears pricked forward, hindquarters tensed as they awaited some signal from the stallion.

Drake couldn't help admiring that four-footed devil, even as he silently cursed the critter, consigning him to seven kinds of hell. The instant he pressed his boot heels to Starburst's quivering sides, a motion so subtle that Drake himself was barely aware of it, the stallion went into action.

Nostrils flared, eyes rolling, the cocky son of a bitch snorted, then threw back his head and whinnied, the sound piercing the moisture-thickened air.

The band whirled toward the hillside and scattered.

The stallion stood watching as Drake, rope in hand and ready to throw, drove Starburst from a dead stop to a full run.

Before Starburst reached the creek, though, the big gray spun on his hind legs and damn near took wing as he raced across the clearing and up the slope.

Drake and his gelding splashed through the narrow stream, and up the opposite bank, the dogs loping alongside.

But hard as he rode, the whole experience felt like a slow-motion sequence from one of his brother Slater's documentaries. He and Starburst might as well have been standing still for all the progress they made closing the gap.

The stallion paused at the top of the ridge, he

and his band sketched against the stormy sky. Time seemed to stop, just for an instant, before the spell was broken and the whole bunch of them vanished as swiftly as if they'd melted into the clouds.

Drake knew he'd lost this round.

He reined Starburst to a halt, grabbed his hat by the brim and slapped it hard against his left thigh before jamming it back on his head. Then, still breathing hard, his jaw clamped down so hard that his ears ached from the strain, he recoiled his rope and fastened it to his saddle.

Harold and Violet were at the foot of the ridge by then, panting visibly and looking back at Drake in confusion.

He summoned them back with a shrill whistle, and they trotted toward him, tongues lolling, sides heaving.

Only when he'd ridden across the creek again did Drake remember the woman. Coupled with the fact that he'd just been outwitted by that damn stallion—again—her presence stuck in his hide like a burr.

She stood watching him as he rode toward her, her face a pale oval within the hood of her slicker.

With bitter amusement, he noticed that her feet were set a little apart, as in a fighter's stance, and her elbows jutted out at her sides. Her hands, no doubt bunched into fists, were pressing hard into her hips.

As he drew nearer, he noted the spark of fury in her eyes and the tight line of her mouth.

Under other circumstances, he might have thrown back his head and laughed out loud at her sheer au-

dacity, but at the moment his pride was giving him too much grief for that.

He hadn't managed to get this close to the stallion—or his prize mares—for longer than he cared to remember. While he hated letting them get away so easily, he knew the dogs would be run ragged if he gave chase, and might even end up getting their heads kicked in. They'd been bred for herding cattle, not wild horses.

They were disappointed just the same and whimpered in baleful protest at being called off, which only made Drake feel like more of a loser than he already did.

Harold and Violet, named for two of his favorite elementary school teachers, ambled over to him, tails wagging. They were drenched to the skin and getting wetter by the minute, but they were quick to forgive, unlike their human counterparts, himself included.

Just then, Drake's chestnut quarter horse, a two-year-old mare with impeccable bloodlines, caught his eye, appearing on the crest of the ridge. Hope stirred briefly, and he drew in his breath to whistle for her, but before he could make a sound, the stallion came back, crowding the mare, nipping at her flanks and butting her with his head.

And then she was gone again.

Damn it all to hell.

“Thanks for nothing, mister!”

It was the intruder, the trespasser. The woman stormed toward Drake through the rain-bent grass, waving the binoculars like a maestro raising a baton

at the symphony. He'd forgotten about her until that moment, and the reminder did nothing for his mood.

He was overreacting, he knew that, but he couldn't seem to change course.

She was a sight, he'd say that, plowing through the grass the way she was, all fuss and fury and wet through and through.

Drake waited a few moments before he spoke, just watching her advance on him like a one-woman army.

Miraculously, he felt his equanimity returning. In fact, he was mildly curious about her, now that the rush of adrenaline from his lame-ass confrontation with the stallion was starting to subside.

Drake waited with what was, for him, uncommon patience. He hoped the approaching tornado, pint-size but definitely category five, wouldn't step in a gopher hole and break a leg, or get bitten by a snake before she completed the charge.

Born and raised on this land, where there were perils aplenty, Drake understood the importance of practical caution. Out here, experience wasn't just the best teacher, it was often a harsh one, too.

As the lady got closer, he made out her face, still framed by the hood of her coat, and a pair of amber eyes that flashed as she demanded, "Do you have any idea how long it took me to get that close to those horses? Days!" She paused to suck in a furious breath. "And what happens when I finally catch up to them? *You* come along and scare them off!"

Drake resettled his hat, tugging hard at the brim, and waited.

The woman all but stamped her feet. “Days!” she repeated wildly.

Drake felt his mouth stretch in the direction of a grin, but he suppressed it. “Excuse me, ma’am, but the fact is, I’m a bit confused. You’re here because...?”

“*Because of the horses!*” The tone and pitch of her voice said he was an idiot for even asking such a question. Apparently, she thought he ought to be able to read her mind—ahead of time, and from a convenient distance. Just like a woman.

Silently, he congratulated himself on his restraint—and for managing a reasonable tone. “I see,” he said, although of course he didn’t see at all. This was his land, and she was on it, and he still didn’t have any idea why.

“The least you could do is apologize,” she informed him, glaring. Her hands were resting on her slim hips, like before, causing her breasts to rise in a very attractive way.

Still mounted, Drake adjusted his hat again. The dogs sat on either side of him, looking on with calm and bedraggled interest. Starburst, on the other hand, nickered and sidestepped and tossed his head, as startled as if the woman had sprung up from the ground like a magic bean stalk.

When Drake replied, he sounded downright amiable, his tone designed to piss her off even more, if that was possible. If there was one thing an angry

woman hated, he figured, it was exaggerated politeness. “Now, why would I apologize? Given that I *live* here, I mean. This is private property, Ms.—”

She wasn’t at all fazed by this information. Nor did she offer her name.

“It took me hours to track those horses down,” she ranted on, flinging her arms out wide for emphasis. “In this weather, no less! I finally get close enough to observe them in their natural habitat, and you... you...” She paused, but only to take in a breath so she could go right on strafing him with words. “*You* try hiding behind a tree for hours without moving a muscle, with water dripping down your neck!”

Drake might have pointed out that he was no stranger to inclement weather, since he rode fence lines and worked under any and all conditions, white-hot heat and blinding snowstorms and everything in between, but he felt no need to explain that to this woman or anyone else on the planet.

Zeke Carson, his late father, had lived by a creed, and he’d drilled it into his sons early on: never complain, never explain. Let your actions tell the story.

“What were you doing there, anyhow, lurking behind my tree?” he asked moderately.

She bristled. “*Your* tree? No one owns a tree. And I wasn’t *lurking!*”

“You were,” he contradicted cheerfully. “And maybe you’re right about the tree. But people can sure as hell own the ground it grows out of, and that’s the case here, I’m afraid.”

She rolled her eyes.

Great, he thought, half amused and half annoyed, a tree hugger, of the holier-than-thou variety, it seemed.

The woman probably drove one of those little hybrid cars, not that there was anything wrong with them, but he'd bet she was self-righteous about it, cruising along at the speed of a lawn mower in the fast lane.

Impatient with the trail his thoughts were taking, Drake made an effort to draw in his horns a bit. He was assuming a lot here.

Still, he made every effort to protect and honor the environment, trees included, and if she was implying otherwise, he meant to set her straight. Nobody loved the natural world more than he did and, furthermore, he had a right to ask questions. The Carsons had held the deed to this ranch since homestead days, and in case she hadn't noticed, he wasn't running a public campground. Nor was this a state or national park.

He leaned forward in the saddle. "Do the words *no trespassing* mean anything to you?" he asked mildly.

Although he didn't want it to show, he was still enjoying this encounter, and way more than he should have at that.

She merely glowered up at him, arms folded now, chin set at an obstinate angle.

Suddenly, Drake was tired to the bone. "All right. Let's see if we can clarify matters. That tree—" he gestured to the one she'd taken refuge behind earlier and spoke very slowly so she could follow "—is

on my ranch.” He paused. “I’m Drake Carson. And you are?”

The look of surprise on her face was gratifying. “*You’re Drake Carson?*”

“I was when I woke up this morning,” he drawled. “I don’t imagine that’s changed since then.” He let a moment pass. “Now, how about answering my original question? What are you doing here?”

She seemed to wilt, and Drake supposed that was a victory, however small, but he wasn’t inclined to celebrate. Her attitude got on his last nerve, but there was something delicate about her. A kind of fragility that made him want to protect her. “I’m studying the horses.”

The brim of Drake’s hat spilled water down his front as he nodded. “Well, yeah, I kind of figured that. It’s really not the point, though, is it? Like I said before, and more than once, this is private property. And if you’d asked permission to be here, I’d know it.”

She blushed, but no explanation was forthcoming. Her mouth opened, then closed again, and her eyes went wide. “*You’re him.*”

“And you would be...?”

The next moment, she was blustering again. Ignoring his question, too. “Tall man on a tall horse,” she remarked, her tone scathing. “Very intimidating.”

A few seconds earlier, he’d been in charge here. Now he felt defensive, which was ridiculous on all counts.

He drew a deep breath, released it slowly and

spoke with quiet authority. He hoped. “Believe me, I’m not trying to intimidate you,” he said. “My point—once again—is that you don’t have the right to be here, much less yell at me.”

“Yes, I do.” Her tone was testy. “Well, the being here part, anyway. And I don’t think I was yelling.”

Of all the freaking gall. Drake glowered at the young woman, who was standing next to his horse by then, unafraid, giving as good as she got.

“Say what?” he asked.

“I *do* have the right to be on this ranch,” she insisted. “I asked your mother’s permission to come out and study the wild horses, and she said yes, fine, no problem at all. She was very supportive, as it happens.”

Well, shit.

Why hadn’t she said that in the first place?

Moreover, why hadn’t his mother bothered to mention any of this to him?

For some reason, even in light of this development, he couldn’t back off, or not completely, anyway. Maybe it was his stubborn pride. “Okay,” he said evenly. “*Why* do you want to study wild horses? Considering that they’re...*wild* and everything.”

She was undaunted. No real surprise there, although it was frustrating as hell. “I’m getting my PhD, and my dissertation is about the way wildlife, particularly horses, co-exist with the animals on working ranches.” She added, “And how ranchers deal with them. Ranchers like you.”

Ranchers like him. Right.

“Let’s get something straight, here and now,” he said, feeling cornered for some reason, and wondering why he liked it. “My mother might have given you the go-ahead to bedevil all the horses you can rustle up on this spread, but that’s as far as it goes. You aren’t going to study *me*.”

“Are you saying you don’t obey your mother?” she asked sweetly.

“That’s it,” he answered, without a trace of goodwill. By then, Drake’s mood was back on a downhill slide. What was he doing out here in the damn rain, bantering with some self-proclaimed intellectual? He wasn’t just cold, tired and wet, he was hungry, since all he’d had before leaving the house this morning was a slice of toast and a cup of coffee. He’d been in a hurry to get started, and now his blood sugar had dropped to the soles of his boots, and the effect on his disposition was not pretty.

The saddle leather creaked as he bent toward her. “Listen, Ms. Whoever-you-are, I don’t give a rat’s ass about your thesis, or your theories about ranchers and wild horses, either. Do whatever it is you do, stay out of my way and try not to get yourself killed while you’re at it.”

She didn’t bat an eye. “Hale,” she announced brightly, as though he hadn’t spoken. “My name is Lucinda Hale, but everybody calls me Luce.”

He inhaled a long, deep breath. If he’d ever had that much trouble learning a woman’s name before, he didn’t recall the occasion. “Ms. Hale, then,” he

began, tugging at the brim of his hat in a gesture that was more automatic than cordial. "I'll leave you to it. While I'm sure your work is absolutely fascinating, not to mention vital to the future of the planet, I have plenty of my own to do. In short, while I've enjoyed shadowboxing with you, I'm fresh out of leisure time."

He might've been talking to the barn wall. "Oh, don't worry," she said cheerfully. "I wouldn't *dream* of interfering. I'll be an observer, that's all. Watching, figuring out how things work, making a few notes. You won't even know I'm around."

Drake bit back a terse reply and reined his horse away, although he didn't use his heels. The dogs, still fascinated by the whole scenario, sat tight. "You're right, Ms. Hale. I won't know you're around, because you won't be. Not around *me*, that is."

"You really are a very difficult man," she observed almost sadly. "Surely you can see the value of my project. Interactions between wild animals, domesticated ones and human beings?"

LUCE WAS COLD, wet, a little amused and *very* intrigued.

Drake Carson was gawking at her as though she'd just popped in from a neighboring dimension, wearing a tutu and waving a wand. His two beautiful dogs, waiting obediently for some word or gesture from their master, seemed equally curious.

The consternation on the man's face was absolutely priceless.

And a very handsome face it was, at least what

she could see of it, shadowed by the brim of his hat the way it was. If he resembled his younger brother, Mace, whom she'd met earlier that day, he was one very impressive man.

She decided to push him a bit, just to see what happened. "You run this ranch, don't you?"

"I do my best."

She liked his voice, which was a deep, slow drawl now, not mocking like before. "Then you're the one I want."

Open mouth, she thought, insert foot.

"For my project, I mean," she added hastily.

His strong jawline tightened visibly. "I don't have time to babysit you," he said. "This is a working ranch, not a resort."

"As I've said repeatedly, Mr. Carson, you won't have to do any such thing. I can take care of myself, and I promise you, I won't be underfoot."

He seemed unconvinced. And still irritated in the extreme.

But he didn't ride away.

Luce had already been warned that Drake wouldn't take to her project, but somehow she hadn't expected this much resistance. She was normally a persuasive person, and reasonable, too.

Of course, it helped if the other person was somewhat agreeable.

Mentally, she cataloged the things she'd learned about Drake Carson.

He was in charge of the ranch, which spanned thousands of acres and was home to lots of cattle

and horses, as well as wildlife. The Carsons had very deep roots in Bliss County, Wyoming, going back several generations. He loved the outdoors, and he was good with animals, particularly horses.

He was, in fact, a true cowboy.

He was also on the quiet side, solitary by nature, slow to anger—but when he did get mad, he could be formidable. At thirty-two, Drake had never been married; he was college-educated, and once he'd gotten his degree—land management and animal husbandry—he'd come straight back to the ranch, having no desire to live anywhere else. He worked from sunrise to sunset and often longer.

Harry, the Carsons' housekeeper, whose real name was Harriet Armstrong, had dished up some sort of heavenly pie when Luce had arrived at the main ranch house fairly early in the day. As soon as Harry understood who Luce was and why she was there, she'd proceeded to spill information about Drake at a steady clip.

Luce had encountered Mace Carson, Drake's younger brother, very briefly, when he'd come in from the family vineyard expressly for a piece of pie. Harry had introduced them and explained Luce's mission—i.e., to gather material for her dissertation and interview Drake in depth, thus getting the rancher's perspective.

Mace had smiled slightly and shaken his head in response to Harry's briefing. "I'm glad you're here, Ms. Hale, but I'm afraid my brother isn't going to be a whole lot of use as a research subject. He's into

his work and not much else, and he doesn't like to be distracted from whatever he's got scheduled for the day. Makes him testy."

A quick glance in Harry's direction had confirmed the sinking sensation Mace's words produced. The older woman had given a small, reluctant nod of agreement.

Well, Luce thought now, standing face-to-horse with Drake, they'd certainly known what they were talking about, Mace and Harry both.

Drake was *definitely* testy.

He stared grimly into the rainy distance for a long moment, then muttered, "As if that damn stallion wasn't enough to get under my hide like a nasty itch."

"Cheer up," Luce said. She loved a challenge. "I'm here to help."

Drake gave her a long, level look. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he asked very slowly, and without a hint of humor. He flung out his free hand, making his point, the reins resting easily in the other one. "My problems are over."

"Didn't you say you were leaving?" Luce asked.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, evidently reconsidering whatever he'd been about to say. Finally, with a hoarse note in his voice, he went on. "I planned to," he said. "But if I did, you'd be out here alone." He looked around. "Where's your horse? You won't be getting close to those critters again today. The stallion will see to that."

Luce's interest was genuine. "You sound as if you know him pretty well."

"We understand each other, all right," Drake said. "We should. We've been playing this game for a while now."

That was going in her notes.

She shook her head in belated answer to his question about her means of transportation. "I don't have a horse," she explained. "I parked my car at your place and hiked out here."

The day had been breathtakingly beautiful, before the clouds lowered and thickened and began dumping rain. She'd hiked in all the western states and in Europe, and this was some gorgeous country. The Grand Tetons were just that. Grand.

"The house is a long way from here. You came all this way *on foot*?" Drake frowned at her. "Did my mother know you were crazy when she agreed to let you do your study here?"

"I actually enjoy hiking. A little rain doesn't bother me. I'll take a hot shower when I get back to the house, change clothes and—"

"When you get back to the house?" he repeated warily. "You're staying there?"

This was where she could tell him that Blythe Carson was an old friend of her mother's, and she'd already been installed in one of the guest rooms, but she decided not to mention that just yet, in case he thought she was taking advantage. She was determined not to inconvenience the family, and if she

felt she was imposing, she would move to a hotel. She'd planned to do just that, actually, but Blythe, hospitable woman that she was, wouldn't hear of it. Lord knew there was plenty of room, she'd said, and it wouldn't make any sense to drive back and forth from town when Luce's work was right here on the ranch.

"You live in a beautiful house, by the way," she said, trying to smooth things over a little. "Not what I expected to find out here in the wide-open spaces. All those chandeliers and oil paintings and gorgeous antiques." Was she jabbering? Yes. She definitely was, and she couldn't seem to stop. "I mean, it's hardly the Ponderosa." She beamed a smile at Drake. "I was planning to check into a hotel, or pitch a tent at one of the campgrounds, but your mother wanted no part of that idea, so...well, here I am." Why couldn't she just shut up? "My room has a fabulous view. It'll be incredible, waking up to those mountains every morning."

Drake, understandably, was still a few beats behind, and little wonder, the way she'd been prattling. "You're *staying* with us?"

Hadn't she just said that?

She smiled her most ingenuous smile. "How else can I observe you in your native habitat?" The truth was, she intended to camp at least part of the time, provided the weather improved, simply because she wanted to enjoy the outdoors.

Drake himself was one of the reasons she'd chosen

the area for her research work, but he didn't know that. He was well respected, a rancher's rancher, with a reputation for hard work, integrity and intelligence.

She'd known, even before Harry filled her in on the more personal aspects of Drake's life, that he was an animal advocate, as well as a prominent rancher, that he'd minored in ecology. She'd first seen his name in print when she was still an undergrad, just a quote in an article, expressing his belief that running a large cattle operation could and should be done without endangering wildlife or the environment. Knowing that her mother and Blythe Carson were close had been a deciding factor, too, of course—a way of gaining access.

She allowed herself a few minutes to study the man. He sat his horse confidently, relaxed and comfortable in the saddle, the reins loosely held. The well-trained animal stood there calmly, clipping grass but not moving otherwise during their discussion.

Drake broke into her reverie by saying, "Guess I'd better take you back before something happens to you." He leaned toward her, reaching down. "Climb on."

She looked at the proffered hand and bit her lip, hesitant to explain that, despite her consuming interest in horses, she wasn't an experienced rider—the last time she'd been in the saddle, at summer camp when she was twelve, something had spooked her mount. She'd been thrown, breaking her collarbone and her right arm, and nearly trampled in the process.

Passion for horses or not, she was anything but confident.

She couldn't tell him that, not after the exchange they'd just had. He would no doubt laugh or make some cutting remark, or both, and her pride smarted at the very idea.

Besides, she wouldn't be holding the reins, handling the huge gelding; Drake would. And there was no denying the difficulties the weather presented, in terms of trailing the stallion and his mares from place to place.

She'd gotten some great footage during the afternoon, though, and made some useful notes, which meant the day wasn't a total loss.

"My backpack's heavy," she pointed out, her drummed-up courage already faltering a little. The top of that horse was pretty far off the ground. She could climb mountains, for Pete's sake, but that was small consolation; she'd been standing on her own two feet the whole time.

At last, Drake smiled, and the impact of that smile was palpable. He was still leaning toward her, still holding out his hand. "Starburst's knees won't buckle under the weight of a backpack," he told her. "Or yours, either."

The logic was sound, if not particularly comforting.

Drake slipped his booted foot out from the stirrup to make room for hers. "Come on. I'll haul you up behind me."

She handed up the backpack, sighed heavily. "Okay," she said. Then, gamely, she took Drake's

hand. His grip was strong, and he swung her up behind him with no apparent effort.

It was easy to imagine this man working with horses, delivering breach calves and digging post-holes for fences.

Settled on the animal's broad back, Luce had no choice but to put her arms around Drake's cowboy-lean waist and grip him like the jaws of life.

The rain was coming down harder, and conversation was impossible.

Gradually, Luce relaxed enough to loosen her hold on Drake's middle.

A little, anyway.

Now that she was fairly sure she wasn't facing certain death, Luce allowed herself to enjoy the ride. Intrepid hiker though she was, the thought of trudging back in the driving rain made her wince.

She hadn't missed the irony of the situation, either. She wanted to study wild horses, but she was a rank greenhorn with a slew of sweaty-palmed phobias. Drake had surely noticed, skilled as he was, and he would have been well within his rights to comment.

He didn't, though.

When they finally reached the ranch house, he was considerate enough not to grin when she slid clumsily off the horse and almost landed on her rear in a giant puddle. No, he simply tugged at the brim of his hat, suppressing a smile, and rode away without looking back.