

*The* WINTER  
LOON 

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A NOVEL

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LORI HENRIKSEN

COUGAR CREEK BOOKS · ASHLAND, OR

## ONE

On a chilly spring day in 1931 my cousin Chloe and I, along with a cowboy called Mac, headed to our first host ranch on a rodeo circuit. At the Billings, Montana train station the conductor's shrill whistle and shout of "All aboard!" reverberated over the commotion of the crowd. Steam spewed from the pistons of the waiting engine. Bits of coal dust caught in my throat as Chloe and I hurried to keep up with Mac.

I brushed a few cinders off my clothes and climbed the three steps onto the train. We settled into our seats, Chloe and Mac facing me as the train rolled out of the station toward Wyoming.

*No turning back now.*

Shortly after the train gathered speed, Chloe started to complain.

"It's too stuffy in here and too many people," she said. She pushed out her lower lip in a pout. "Let's move. I'm dying here."

"You're not dying, darlin'," Mac rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Oh yeah. I just might, and then where would you be?” She slugged him in his bicep. I doubted he even felt it.

Chloe and I had been friends from the first time we met at age six. We were cousins, but couldn't have been more different. I had light hazel eyes and auburn hair, chestnut like my horse *Satin Dancer's* flanks. I guessed that with her black hair and dark eyes, Chloe resembled her mother, who had died of consumption shortly after she was born. Chloe's dad had raised her to be tough and bold, while I tended to be more cautious and circumspect.

Chloe had been sweet on Mac since the two of us worked alongside the ranch hands on several cattle drives with her father Michael, my mother's brother, so Mac knew we were strong riders. He'd made all the arrangements for our transportation, competition, and lodging. His daddy owned a big ranch south of Billings and was fronting the money for all three of us.

I silently agreed with Chloe. The windows were closed against the outside chill, and we had ended up in the first car behind the engine. It could have been the heat from the coal burner making it so warm inside that they collected their belongings and left to find a less crowded car. *So what?* I didn't mind a bit, having tired of their boring banter.

With a whole seat to myself, I preferred staring out the window at the sagebrush that had been buffeted into odd shapes, unable to escape the prairie winds. The click of metal wheels on the tracks repeated: *Free. I'm free. Free. I'm free. Free. I'm free.*

I'd stepped off the edge of my world without knowing where I would end up. Me, Ruth Thompson, age eighteen, a chambermaid turned gypsy cowgirl.

The Great Depression had pushed us all to our limits, closing things down, including hearts and minds. Everyone was scrambling to earn money any way they could to stay

out of soup kitchen lines, and for me the rodeo circuit meant no more weary shifts cleaning rooms at the Nicolet Hotel in Minneapolis. No more paltry paychecks, dashing my dream of saving enough money for college tuition. And the bonus, no more feeling trapped by the expectation of my family that I marry my sweetheart, Duke. Sure I missed and loved him, but I didn't want to get married. I had never pictured myself wearing the white dress, ending up a wife and mother.

Duke and I hadn't discussed marriage—a logical step into our future—although we'd been inseparable since age thirteen. He was sensitive, smart, and an accomplished artist with a goal of becoming an engineer. When I asked why he chose engineering, he'd pushed his reddish blond hair off his forehead in a familiar gesture and with an intense look in his clear green eyes answered, "I want to build bridges."

Later in the day, I subdued my hunger gnawing on strips of beef jerky and chunks of hard cheese, pungent and oily, cut with my penknife. My buttocks, sore from relentless practice directed by Mac for the last few months, chafed on the wooden seat. I recalled the day he had explained his plan to teach us the basics of barrel racing and said, "Let's just say you gals are going to be a hobby of mine." Chloe had laughed and declared, "You're a lucky cowboy."

I'd pushed away my discomfort and laughed along with the two of them. The grueling practice sessions didn't bother me. All I cared about was spending my time with Satin Dancer, and the harmony of the two of us together all day, every day.

For the time being I ignored my aches, folded my jacket to use as a pillow, and soon fell asleep to the train's rocking cadence.

We stopped in Casper, Wyoming to pick up more riders. Rodeo folk milled around, securing their horses in the

stock cars before boarding the train. I got off to check on Satin Dancer, who greeted me with a whinny and nuzzled her thanks for the fresh oats I added to the feedbag in her makeshift stall. Satisfied with her comfort, I left to search for Chloe and Mac.

I found them asleep in a car near the rear of the train. Mac's chin rested on his chest and his hat was pulled down to cover his eyes. His feet, still in his boots, were propped up on the seat facing them. Chloe, her petite body curled like a snail, rested her head on his shoulder. The noisy shuffle of people boarding the train and throwing bags into the overhead rack didn't seem to disturb them.

The smell of food lured me outside to the throng of vendors selling fresh meat sandwiches and hot soup. I bought a hunk of crusty bread from an old woman who filled my tin cup with strong black coffee and charged me a nickel.

I drank the coffee and climbed aboard the train, taking a different seat in order to leave our old ones for a foursome of new passengers. Without Chloe and Mac to keep me company, I pulled a book out of my bag and settled in next to the window, but the noisy greetings of rodeo folk filling the train car had a festive air that distracted my attention, and I closed the book after reading the same couple of sentences several times. As I looked up, a woman wearing a black cowboy hat and loose pants tucked into red boots walked down the aisle. She waved and called hello to a few people, then stopped next to me.

"This taken?" she asked in a gravelly voice.

I shifted my body closer to the window. A loon feather hooked in the band of her hat tickled my arm when she reached down to push a small bag underneath the seat in front of us.

"I'm Rollie Denton. Been on this rodeo circuit more times than I care to admit." She took off her hat and placed it in the overhead rack.

The black and white feather reminded me of home. The loons would be mating now, soon gliding across the water with chicks on their backs. I pictured Mother out on the lake in her rowboat, fishing for walleye. The image of her at the stove, fish sizzling in the pan, made my mouth water and I resolved not to be homesick.

I introduced myself and said, "This is my first rodeo."

"I thought so. Welcome." She reached out to shake my hand.

"How can you tell?"

"Sometimes you know things." The leathery skin around her eyes crinkled when she smiled. "Besides, everyone else is either playing cards or having fun, talking and laughing, catching up on things. You're sitting here all by your lonesome, reading a book."

"I'm here with my cousin and her fella. He's our sponsor. They moved to another car."

She grimaced. I could swear she rolled her eyes, and I wondered why my comment had bothered her. She excused herself and left to chat with a few people I guessed she knew. She returned when the train began to labor, chugging and grinding as the terrain grew more mountainous.

"We're climbing into the alpine desert. It'll be colder soon, especially at night. What're you reading?"

"*Anna Karenina*." Happy for her interest in my favorite book, I wanted to talk with her about it.

"Never heard of it. Sure is thick."

A little later I heard a snort and saw she had fallen asleep. I held still, not wanting to disturb her. Her face looked as if it had been sculpted by the wind and sun, its many lines giving her the wise appearance of someone who could take care of herself.

After a while the train slowed to a crawl, and the change in pace woke Rollie.

"We're getting close to our stop." She stretched her neck

from side to side. "It always seems that old engine won't make the climb."

I wanted to learn more about her. "You must know a lot of people on this train."

"I do. Every year I get tired of listening to the same old stories, lies, and bull." She let out a hearty laugh.

I struggled to keep the conversation going. "Where're you from?"

"Here, there, and everywhere. I don't call anywhere home."

"I'm from Minnesota, near Minneapolis."

"Been out to Minnesota. Rode a bronc at the Fort Snelling rodeo a few years ago, before they pushed us gals out from competing on the bucking stock at the big rodeos."

"You mean because of Bonnie McCarroll?" I knew from reading Chloe's rodeo magazines that she had been fatally trampled, and rodeo rules had changed for women because of it.

"Yeah. Now we're mostly confined to barrel racing, trick riding, and relays. She had nerves of steel."

"You miss riding broncos?"

"My body doesn't miss the wear and tear, but I do miss the thrill." She closed her eyes and thought for a second, as if deciding to say more. "We're cheap entertainment on this small circuit. We bend the rules from time to time."

"Come on. I'm going to get my stuff together. We'll be there in about ten minutes. All hell breaks loose soon as we arrive, so it's best to get off first."

Rollie walked down the aisle, reached into the overhead rack without needing to stretch, and swung her bag down. She gestured for me to join her.

With my book tucked under my arm I grabbed my duffel and hastened to where Rollie steadied herself against the seat next to the exit.

The train lurched, brakes squealing, and came to a stop.

"Where are we?" I asked her.

"Middle of nowhere. Closest town is Douglas, Wyoming."

A powerful, cold wind almost knocked me down as I stepped off the train. Pinpricks of sand stung my cheeks and stuck in my hair. I trotted along the length of the train searching for Chloe and Mac, but didn't see them. Nervous sweat dampened my underarms. I lost sight of Rollie as people pushed past without seeming to notice me, and had to watch my step to avoid patches of snow that had been trampled to mud.

Then someone grabbed my arm, and I whirled around as Rollie pulled me aside. "Something wrong?"

"No. Well, I don't know, I can't find my cousin or my sponsor."

"Don't fret. We'll all end up in the same place. You can find them at the ranch. There's no way to get anywhere else." She nodded at my book. "Maybe you should put that in your duffel."

Cowboys on horseback rounded up cattle, making their way down ramps from the animal cars. Black and white dogs, their noses close to the ground, wove in and out, yipping and nipping the livestock into paddocks set up near the tracks. The crowd swarmed around us. Wind and the stench from the livestock made me dizzy. I stumbled and Rollie caught my arm to steady me.

"Toss your gear in the trucks," a cowboy shouted. "We'll sort it out when we get to the ranch."

"Damn, it's the same every year," Rollie said from behind me. "They treat us like them cows out there. Come on. Let's get our horses."

She led the way and pointed out a line of Ford flatbed trucks, many of them hitched to horse trailers.

"The ranch hands from our host, the Settle R, leave those trucks over there for us to load up. I claim one so I can keep track of my stuff. They'll either catch a ride with



one of us or herd the stock from the train to the ranch on horseback."

By then the wind carrying the sweet dusty fragrance of sage stung my nose and had whipped my curly hair into a tangled mess. Rollie hung on to her hat with her free hand, I'd left mine tied to my saddle in the tack car.

As Rollie headed toward the rear of the train where the horses were unloading I hurried to keep up with her long stride, then spotted Satin Dancer in one of the paddocks.

"Give me your bag. We'll take the truck third in line. The only way to claim it is to grab the key they leave in the ignition." Rollie dashed away toward the trucks, leaving me alone. I attached a short leather strap to Satin D's bridle and zigzagged through the crowd, doing my best to keep up.

Rollie stopped and spun around. "Hey, Sue Ann," she yelled above the commotion to a woman heading toward the vehicles. "Good to see ya, girl. Come on." She waved toward the truck. "Ride with us."

They shook hands and exchanged greetings. "Stay with the rig," Rollie told Sue Ann.

"She's been through this as many times as I have," Rollie declared as she turned toward me. "Let her hang on to your horse. We need to get our saddles and the rest of our stuff and load the flatbed."

Hating to leave Satin Dancer, but having no choice, I handed the strap to Sue Ann and followed Rollie.

I found my saddle and relieved to see my hat, crammed it on my head, securing the tie under my chin. Carrying our gear, we wended our way through the crowd to the truck Rollie had selected where we retrieved Satin D and Rollie's horse, a sorrel gelding named Hornet. I led the horses into the open-air trailer while Rollie grabbed the rest of our belongings.

The two of us waited in the truck while Sue Ann got her things and led her horse into the trailer in front of us. When

she squeezed into the small cab, her ample body barely left enough room for me.

With Rollie driving we headed west, squinting into the setting sun. The gravel road ran along a creek lined with cottonwoods, their branches bending in the wind.

"Does it always blow this hard?" I shouted over the roar of the engine.

"It does most days." Rollie shifted gears on an incline. "Some folks have a real hard time with it."

Sue Ann pulled a pouch of tobacco and a tin holding rolling papers out of her pocket. With expert fingers, she placed a pinch of tobacco in the crease of the paper, rolled it, lit it, and passed it over me to Rollie. She started another. "Want it?"

"No thanks." I shook my head.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen" I answered, fudging more than a year to impress her. "I'll be twenty in July." I had trouble catching my breath and coughed. It could have been from the cigarette smoke filling the cab of the truck, the dust in the wind, or maybe it was due to my lie.

"It's the altitude, honey. We're above five thousand feet. The air's thinner." Sue Ann handed me her canteen. "Here, drink some of this. You'll get used to it if you remember to drink enough water."

What would my family think if they could see me bouncing along in a beat up old truck between these two seasoned cowgirls? When my brother Hal, six years older than me, learned I'd joined a rodeo he had bitterly objected. "My sister running all over the country on a horse playing cowboys and Indians, how do you think that's going to reflect on our family?"

But it sure didn't seem fair that he had everything *he* wanted—a college degree, a fiancée, and a job in Dad's office that had paid his college tuition.

"I need to earn enough money so I can go to university like you and Duke."

I'd squirmed under the gaze of his dark hazel eyes, always so curious and probing behind his thick glasses. "I want to study psychology. Times have changed. I can't earn enough as a chambermaid, and there's not enough money for Dad to help me." I'd thought that for sure he'd approve of me earning my own money to go to school, especially since he'd met his fiancée, Dorothy, at college.

"What about Duke? You two are always together. We thought . . ."

"We're not engaged. I need to get away for a while."

He ignored what I wanted and said, "I've always known that horse was a mistake, and Mother taking you out to Montana every summer. You should stay home. Help her run the house."

The memory of our conversation still annoyed me.

I downed a slug of water from Sue Ann's canteen and passed it back to her.

Within an hour we arrived at the entrance to our host ranch, where whitewashed letters spelling "Settle R" formed an arch over open gates. The ranch sprawled in several directions and was dotted with two bunkhouses, a couple of barns, and several corrals and pastures. A large white farmhouse surrounded by oaks sat off by itself. We piled out of the truck in a bare area not far from the horse barn.

I clucked to Satin Dancer and Hornet, encouraging them to back out of the trailer. The horses shook out their manes and stomped the ground with their hooves, testing their freedom. I left them side by side, necks stretched to the ground as they sampled the grass.

Sue Ann also corralled her horse, and then headed in the direction of the bunkhouse.

Rollie waved to her. "We won't see much of Sue Ann," she said to me. "She'll find herself a cowboy in no time."

Rollie and I carried our saddles to the barn. "I stay away from the cowboys, and if you're smart, you will, too. If you let 'em, they'll be all over you like ants on a honeypot." She laughed and gave my arm a gentle punch as if we were old friends.

"I've got a beau at home. I'm here to ride." I took the shovel she handed me and tackled the horse trailer. I shoveled and swept the straw into the wheelbarrow and she dumped it behind the barn.

"I like the way you handle horses and can't believe you're a sponsor girl." She shook her head and walked ahead of me toward the bunkhouse.

Wondering what she meant, I grabbed my bag and followed. What could be wrong with having a sponsor? She made it sound irritating or shameful.