

REMEMBER NOT
Book 1 in For Love & Horses
By Barbara Elllin Fox

Chapter 1

The last thing she needed was a cowboy on his horse following them through the parking lot. Eskador snorted and rose on his hind legs, black mane trailing his neck. Rylie Davis released the pressure on the horse's lead. She focused on reaching the pen at the edge of the asphalt.

"It's okay, buddy. Keep it together a little longer, then you can burn off this stress." The energetic show jumper stamped his hooves to the pavement and curled his neck, ready to explode.

The cowboy tracking them had better back off soon. Why did he follow them, anyway? Most competitors were in the show ring or getting ready for competition. This should have been the perfect time to exercise Eskador before tonight's final event.

The horse excelled at competing under the spotlight, but being crowded by a stranger stirred his abused past. Anger and nervous energy radiated through him. Sweat ran down the sides of Rylie's face and dribbled into her collar. Her pulse raced. She murmured to the gelding towering at her side, then let out a slow breath. *Stay calm. Ignore the stranger.* If Eskador sensed her fear, the horse would go berserk.

No one wanted fourteen hundred pounds of angry hooves and teeth loose on the show grounds.

Rylie glanced over her shoulder checking to see if the man followed. *Yup. Still there. Watching like I'm iron and he's a magnet.* He sat tall in the saddle, gray cowboy hat perfectly

straight, rein hand resting on the saddle horn. She eased Eskador around a horse trailer, then between two trucks.

The cowboy moved his horse forward.

Eskador plunged. An aggravated rumble worked from deep inside the knot of nerves and muscle, more grunts than a groan. A sound he only made under duress.

“Easy big guy. He’s just a fancy wannabe on his little cow pony. Nothing to worry about.” If only she felt as confident as her words. This guy didn’t back off, proving he enjoyed messing with a lone woman’s horse.

Eskador grunted and jerked his head, slinging globs of saliva into the air. The odor of nervous sweat rolled off his slick black coat in steamy waves. Rivulets of white foam streaked his chest.

She’d expected extra stress at the Oklahoma horse show, especially on the day of her biggest competition, but the cowboy’s pressure surpassed extra. Now the stress verged on dangerous. What made this man ride so close? She didn’t have time to explain Eskador’s distrust of men to a stranger. What if he followed her? Shoot, she hoped not. She’d had her fill of that in college.

Memories of another man’s undivided attention churned her stomach like a pit filled with snakes. She sure didn’t want the cowboy’s attention. Eskador would come unglued if he didn’t back away.

Only a hundred feet left to the pen.

Her horse’s shod hooves exploded against the asphalt like the end of a fireworks display. She’d yell over her shoulder for the man to clear out, but her shouts would wind Eskador’s rubber band tighter. Choosing the least of two evils, she focused on the pen.

Relief whooshed through her as she wrapped her free hand around the gate lever and jerked. Eskador lunged through the opening and swung around long enough for her to unclip his lead. He made a giant leap then bolted around the circle.

Rylie secured them inside the pen and spoke in a soothing voice. Eskador raced, spending his angst at imaginary assailants. Waiting for the perfect moment to direct the horse’s energy, tension drained from Rylie’s body. With him safe in the corral, she didn’t care if the cowboy watched.

Sand pelted the air as the horse's fervor lessened. Allowing him room to circuit once more, she watched for his ready signs. He turned one fine black ear toward her scooping up her whispers. When his huge eye locked on hers she stepped into his path to change his direction.

Metal clanked. Vice-like limbs girded Rylie's middle trapping her arms. Air-born and forced backward, her scream ripped through the air. She clawed to get away. The more she jerked and flailed the tighter her attacker clamped.

One steel arm slammed the gate shut while the other tightened around her ribs. Rylie fisted and twisted until her feet gained purchase with the ground. She jerked out of his grasp, balanced, and drove a kick to the cowboy's chest. He toppled backward, landing under his cow pony's belly.

"Are you crazy?" She screamed through shallow breaths and a pounding heart. "Leave me alone!"

He shifted toward his pale cowboy hat as it rolled through the dirt.

"Keep away!" Tremors ran the distance of Rylie's body. Her mind relived the stench of liquor and sour breath as real now as if it were ten years ago. *Your own fault, tease. Taking what you owe me.* Evil accusations seated in her brain.

The rush of strength behind her kick gave way to streams of weakness coursing through her legs. She backed toward Eskador's pen, never taking her attention off the stunned man in the dirt. Her skin went clammy as her pulse switched to thready. She bumped the fence, relieved to grasp solid metal. Knees locked, she willed strength to her trembling self.

His horse sidestepped. The assailant remained in a squat, jaw clenched, and eyes narrowed squarely on her.

She exhaled, keeping her voice steady to calm Eskador. "It's okay, buddy. I'm right here." Her horse had survived a life of violence, and now this? Eskador continued circuiting the pen behind her. She slid her hand into a pocket and pulled out a mint. Keeping a careful eye on the man, she slipped her hand through the rails of the pen. Hoof beats softened to her whispers. Moist lips nuzzled her palm and lifted the morsel. Warm breath tickled her ear. She inhaled. His horsey scent centered her.

Her attacker pushed to one knee.

"Don't. Move. Jerk." Her voice sounded stronger than she felt. *Call for help.* She reached for her cell and groaned. *It's in the tack room.* Her gaze tightened, and she straightened her

stance. She'd knocked him down once. *If he comes near me, I'll kick him again.* What made him think he could grab her like a parking garage mugger? She shuddered.

The man froze, big brown eyes staring, brown curls sticking up where he'd run his fingers through his hair. A perfect dirty boot print decorated the front of his fancy yellow shirt. A kernel of satisfaction settled in Rylie's stomach. This time she defended herself.

He smiled.

Rylie braced. He'd disrespected her as a professional and violated her place of business. A true cowboy would never break the first rule of horse training by messing with her and Eskador. How dare he smile? Why did handsome men think they could do whatever they pleased?

He shifted again.

A long time ago she'd learned her lesson about men. *Well, this isn't college, and he's not Dan.*

She positioned for her next kick. "I said. Don't. Move."

* * *

Wow. She kicked me. Jason rubbed at the boot print just below the pearl snap on the pocket of his shirt and steadied his breathing. His chest felt like she'd hit him with the butt end of a rifle, and his arms burned where she'd dug with her fingernails. Grains of Oklahoma clay crunched between his molars, sparking heat on his tongue. He rubbed his hand back and forth on his neck, turning his head left then right. *Dang.*

Probably should have left her alone.

He'd sat alert in the saddle watching the petite woman with the crazy horse make their way through the crowded parking lot. Why did she need a horse that big, anyway? He had to hand it to her. Unlike most trainers who'd jerk the lead to demand a horse submit, her fluid motion allowed the animal to cavort at her side. A smart choice since a woman her size couldn't control the behemoth no matter how hard she yanked the lead.

Another lunge from the black horse had locked Jason's breath in his chest. Unbidden images clouded his brain. A body tangled under horses' hooves. Sulfur wound through the ghost in his mind as a woman in a blood-soaked burqa crumbled into the sand. His eye stuck with the parking lot woman and the horse. Instinct and training coiled his muscles into steel springs ready to leap if the animal made one move in the wrong direction.

Then she'd stepped into the path of the berserk beast. Jason's adrenaline-charged brain denied him the option of decision or logic and drove him to save her.

"Don't. Move."

The resolute voice drew him from his thoughts. She stood fifteen feet away, wide-eyed, her leg positioned to deliver a second booted missile.

He maintained a squat next to Jigger, grateful his horse hadn't panicked. The Stetson lay in the dirt ten feet away.

Her eyes dared him. A thick strand of hair dangled from under the edge of her ball cap, and hands fisted on her slender frame. Beautiful and angry. The stare sliced him the way a pocketknife sections an apple. He'd thought her an air-head blonde with visions of riding into the sunset on her crazy horse. A guy can be wrong.

The choices for a response raced through his mind. Choosing Texas manners, he managed a nervous smile.

The black animal let out a snort, stuck his nose through the bars of the fence, and nuzzled her shoulder.

Jason rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Safety always took priority, especially with women. When lives were at stake in the Middle East, you acted first and worried who you upset later. Had he overreacted? Could he fix this mess?

He searched his mind for a compliment.

"You have a powerful kick." His chest tightened at her guarded expression.

"You're lucky I aimed for your chest." The sarcasm in her voice didn't hide the quiver.

"Without a doubt."

"Do you make a habit of grabbing women you don't know?"

That sure made him sound bad. "I thought the horse would trample you."

She huffed and stood taller. "Trample me? You know nothing about me or my horse." She folded her arms. "Only an idiot crowds a nervous horse. If he'd gotten loose, you'd have more than a boot print on your shirt."

Jason's thighs screamed from squatting. "Mind if I get up?"

Her stance widened, and she lifted both fists to her chest. "Don't come near me or I'll kick you again, only this time I won't be so careful with my aim."

“Yes, ma’am. Not one step toward you.” The blood rushed back into his legs as he stood and moved to retrieve his hat. “Name’s Jason Hughes. I misread the situation and thought you needed help. I’m sorry for interfering.”

She glanced away, then back. “Your kind, Mr. Hughes, always act sorry.”

“That seems unfair since you don’t know me.”

Her eyes became dark slits. “I bet sorry won’t stop you from interfering with someone next time. Why don’t you get on your little brown pony and leave me and my horse alone?”

He shifted his hat to the other hand. “I can’t leave unless you accept my apology.”

“We were minding our own business when you swooped in with your Captain America super-powers to screw up my training session. You upset my horse and dragged me from the corral. It would be better if you’d just leave.”

Captain America super-powers? “Is there any way I can make this up to you? Could I take you to dinner?” It was worth a shot.

She threw both hands into the air with a huff. “Are you kidding me? Do I look like someone who’d go out with a man who has the nerve to put his hands on a woman the way you just did? You’re delusional.” She started for the pen gate.

“Are you a horse whisperer?” They always used round pens.

Hesitation interrupted her stride. She turned in his direction, her blue eyes dark and narrowed. “Do you even know what that means?”

He brushed a wad of clay from his hat. His trainer called them the tree huggers of the equine world. It looked like a bunch of tricks to Jason, not real horsemanship.

“I didn’t think so.” She spun around, opened the gate, and hooked a rope to the black horse’s halter. “I’d appreciate it if you’d take old brownie there.” She motioned toward Jigger. “And go away. My horse doesn’t like you.”

“Will you tell me your name?”

“I’d prefer to eat dirt, Mr. Hughes. Now, please, leave me alone.”

Jason slid the Stetson on his head, grabbed Jigger’s reins, checked the saddle, and mounted. When he wheeled around to bid her farewell, the black horse walked across the parking lot, tail swaying like a gentle family horse, with the woman astride his back.

The shift of her hips moving with the horse's gait mesmerized Jason as she rode away. His chest burned and his arms stung. She sure packed a wallop for her size. He whirled Jigger and rode toward the west side barns that separated the quarter horses from the rest of the competitors.

Jigger turned at the dirt aisle for the Diamond H stalls and stopped. Jason breathed in the fresh odor of pine shavings. Four horses hung their heads over Dutch stall doors. The chestnut nickered in their direction.

A ranch hand took the reins when Jason dismounted. "I'll take care of him, boss."

Jason nodded then headed for the tack room in search of the medical kit. He grabbed the plastic covering of an ice pack with one hand and disinfectant and gauze pads with the other. Then he slid into a seat, unsnapped his shirt, flexed the compress, and laid it on the red welt forming in the middle of his chest. His muscles clenched at the cold, forcing a sharp intake of breath.

He worked on disinfecting two claw wounds on his right arm when Santo, the Diamond H trainer, came around the last stall and handed him a water bottle. The cowboy scrunched his weathered face in a stare before he pulled up a chair. "Did old Jigger throw you, boss?"

Jason set his doctoring aside and gulped half the bottle, letting the cool water rinse the sand crystals down his throat. "Nope. Had a run-in with a horse whisperer."

"Horse whisperers. Not worth the powder to blow 'em up." Santo grunted and folded his arms. "What d'ya do to him?"

Readjusting the compress, Jason focused across the aisle on nothing. Blonde strands dangling next to big blue eyes, fists clenched on her shapely hips. He'd rescue her again just to catch her attention. Back in his college days he might have done something rash, maybe kiss her, but now he'd learned how to respect a lady. "You mean, what did I do to *her*?"

"You messed with a lady? Now I've heard everything." Santo slapped his thigh. "Must've been mighty tough to get you in the dirt."

"Tough, but a little thing. Her head might make the top of my shoulder. Had a big kick, too. Stood right up to me." And why had he found that so blasted attractive, anyway? Jason wiped a wrist across his mouth. "Man, I hate this dirt."

"Horse whisperer is bad enough. You had to go find a female one." Santo shook his head and sighed. "I'm gonna saddle up." Halfway to the tack room door, he turned. "Oh, boss, almost forgot. A friend of mine's got a rider who might interest you."

“Yeah?”

“Says she won English equitation championships as a kid. Now she rides the big jumpers.”

Jason straightened to reposition the cold pack over the angry welt. *Did the woman have cleats on her boots?*

“My friend says she’s a good hand, serious about business. Ridin’ tonight if you want to see.”

Aggravation grabbed at Jason. “I planned on us getting out of here this afternoon.”

Santo raised a dark eyebrow, tipped his head, and shrugged a shoulder. “Are you tellin’ me you already found the rider we need for next season?”

“No.” The reputation of his quarter horse breeding program depended on winning, and he needed a champion rider for his mare. Tonight would be his last chance to see a anyone in action this show season.

Santo strode forward reaching for the tack room door handle and glanced back at Jason. “Starts at seven.” A grin played across his face. “If you think you’ll be over your injuries by then.”

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