

The Christmas Hat

By Vicki Nordquist Long

He didn't mind the taste of dust, especially after a good ride. The aches his body felt were welcome. He was living his dream, riding broncs from town to town, rodeo to rodeo. This year he just might make it to the National Finals in Las Vegas. He'd just finished a good ride, and had won his go round. 'Getting closer to the NFR,' he thought as he dusted himself off and walked to the arena gate.

Todd James leaned on the fence near the chutes watching as the bull riders limbered up. He heard the bellowing of a rank bull named Lucifer as he was driven from pen to chute. He saw her standing next to the chute that was holding the bull. She was beautiful, in an Elizabeth Taylor sort of way. Her hair was dark, and she had violet eyes. Her waist was small enough to encircle with his two hands. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Todd heard a voice next to him.

"That's Molly Langer, you know Sam Langer's widow."

He looked to his right. Standing next to him was a bullfighter, one of rodeo's heroes who put their life between the cowboy, and bulls like Lucifer intent upon killing the men fool enough to get on him.

He was dressed in clown garb, with a face painted, like any other clown, in his trademark paint, his persona. On his head was a dirty brown Stetson. There appeared to be a horse hoof print on the brim.

"She owns that bull Lucifer" the clown said. "She hates the rodeo now and doesn't want to be here, but that bull brings them a little money now that Sam's gone."

Todd knew the story all too well. Sam Langer, the best bull rider in 25 years, was killed the year before when a bull came down on his head crushing his skull. Sam had lain in a coma for months before finally dying. All of rodeo mourned.

"Saw her put a note on the message board in the rodeo office. She's looking for a hand to help at her place rounding up the calves and branding them for the next few weeks. Sam's death slowed down that kind of work at her ranch, I suppose."

Todd turned to reply, but the clown was gone, heading into the arena.

He forgot about watching the bull riding, and headed toward the rodeo office. As Todd approached, he heard a horse squeal and the crack of a whip hitting flesh. Instinctively, he turned toward the sound. Tom Jarvis was beating on his little black mare again. Tom was a roper of mediocre talent, and less intellect, with a penchant for whipping his horse into submission. Todd ran to Tom and grabbed his arm before the whip could strike again.

"You can't beat cow sense into a horse," he told Tom. "They either got it or they don't"

"I paid good money for this mare," the cowboy replied, the flash of anger still on his face. "Her daddy is in the Hall of Fame as a roping horse, and she is going to give me what I want. She's real fast coming out, but she doesn't want to stop when I throw the rope."

"Just because her sire was a roping horse don't mean she's one," corrected Todd. "It can't be beat into her."

"She's got it in her, and she's gonna learn I'm the boss", Tom answered, leading the mare in the direction of his trailer.

Todd shook his head at the man's ignorance and headed to the rodeo office. He took one last look at the horse. She was small, but perfectly turned out. He caught the image of a brand on her hip as the two disappeared in the darkness behind the arena.

Even the mare's hall of fame father wouldn't make Tom Jarvis a winner. He was the one without the talent, Todd mused.

The bulletin board was a garden of notes that had sprouted out of nowhere.

"Anybody going to Cheyenne," one said.

"My barrel horse is lame, help," cried another plaintively.

Todd had a hard time finding what he was looking for among all the notes hanging on the cork bulletin board. Finally there it was in neat feminine writing,

"Wanted, Hired Hand for two weeks to help round up calves for branding. Can't pay much but the food's good."

Todd tore the note from the board and placed it in his pocket. He left the office in search of the pretty widow who put it there that afternoon.

Todd found Molly Langer leaving the area behind the chutes.

The bull riding was over. Once again Lucifer had given his cowboy eight seconds of pure terror and he had won the go round.

As Todd approached Molly, he was struck by her dark beauty that was enhanced by the sadness in her violet eyes.

"Excuse Me," Todd said, holding out the paper from the office bulletin board, "I was wondering if you'd found the hired hand you were looking for?"

Molly looked up and instantly recognized Todd James. She still followed the standings. As much as she hated it, she was still a part of rodeo. He was having a great year and was probably heading for his first NFR. He was ruggedly handsome with dusty blonde hair and piercing light blue eyes. She'd heard so many admiring comments from women around the circuit. Those blue eyes could melt a cold heart in an instant.

"No, I just put the sign up this morning," Molly replied.

"Well, I'd like to talk to you about the job", Todd said amazed he was doing this. Was it those violet eyes he found he was losing himself in?

"I can't imagine why a cowboy on his way to the NFR would want to hire himself out as a ranch hand" Mary retorted, shocked he would even consider the job.

"If I win tomorrows go round, I go to the NFR in a month. If I don't, I go home until things start up again in January in Fort Worth. Either way, I'm off for a few weeks", Tom found himself answering.

"I like Idaho, and wouldn't mind staying for a few weeks. Besides, it's been a long time since I worked with cows. Might help take some of the pressure off from the last year, and help me rest up for the big show if I make it."

Molly considered his response, and remembered how her husband had like to unwind doing ranch chores in between rodeos.

"Alright, if you want to come by after tomorrow nights rodeo you can have the job, I'll give you directions to my place."

Pulling out a small notebook and pen from her jacket pocket, Molly scribbled the directions and handed them to Todd.

"Good luck tomorrow night."

As Molly turned to leave, Todd noticed he wasn't the only one watching her walk away. The bullfighter still in his clown costume gave a nod, and turned to leave.

The next evening Todd won the final go round, and finally after three years of biting dust, he was going to the National Finals in Las Vegas.

As he was loading his gear in his truck, the bullfighter approached. Todd noticed the brown Stetson with the horse's hoof print, thinking it was odd that it wasn't a bull's hoof print given his occupation.

"Congratulations", the bullfighter said. "Your first NFR is real special. Can't believe that worthless Tom Jarvis made it. Since he finally hooked up with a good header, guess it was just

dumb luck that the mediocre healer could finally make the NFR. I hear he is planning to whip that little mare into shape for the big show. Won't work though. She was meant for barrels."

Before Todd could reply, the bullfighter turned around and walked away.

Molly Langer's Lone Star Ranch was located near Idaho Falls, due north of Pocatello. It was situated in the heart of the state's spectacular mountain river country. Lush meadows, dense forested trails, and windswept high mountain ridges surrounded the beautiful rustic ranch house.

Todd always loved the beauty of his Texas Hill Country, but the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains made a skeptic into a believer in the divine Creator.

Molly stood on the porch and greeted Todd.

"Welcome, we have a guest cabin around back."

She led him to a comfy two-room log house.

"I'll let you settle in while I saddle up some horses. As soon as you're ready, I'll give you a tour of the property", Molly said as she turned toward the barn.

After he'd unpacked, Todd went to the barn where Molly waited with two saddled ranch geldings, and a pretty little girl that looked to be about eight years old.

"Anna, this is Mr. James. He is going to help me brand and mend the fences for the next few weeks".

"Hello Anna", Todd responded as he held out his hand.

Anna just stood there not saying a word.

"Don't you want to ride out with us?" asked Todd.

"I don't ride", replied Anna, and she curtly turned and walked away.

The ranch was nestled in a 180-acre field planted in alfalfa at the base of a mountain covered with Quaken Aspen, Douglas Fir, and sage. A year round stream ran through the middle. Todd thought he spotted antelope running on the elevations.

"Beautiful place", Todd said.

"Yes," Molly replied. "Sam loved it here. He was raised in the desert of West Texas, and after he made some money in the rodeo circuit, he wanted to live in the Rocky Mountains. But, he never lost his love for Texas. That's why he named the place Lone Star Ranch, and adopted our brand of the outline of the state with an L inside."

"How come Anna doesn't ride?" Todd asked.

"Oh she grew up in the saddle," Molly explained sadly. "Right before her father died he bought her a beautiful black mare she was learning to barrel race on. Then he had the accident, and was in the hospital for several months. It depleted our savings. The mare was very valuable, and I had to sell her to make ends meet. Anna has never forgiven me and refuses to get on another horse. It's all I can do to hang on to this place. But we get by with the income Lucifer brings at the rodeos, and the cattle I sell at market."

"I seem to remember reading about Sam buying that bull that helped him win his first NFR title", replied Todd.

"Yes", Molly said, "But Lucifer is getting old, and I don't know how many bucks he's got left in him."

After their ride, Molly made dinner. Anna joined them, but never spoke, and seemed to mechanically go through the motions of eating. When she finished she left the table for her room with barely a word.

"Such a sad little girl". Todd observed.

"She is taking a long time getting over the loss of her daddy and the loss of her horse", Molly replied, her eyes misting.

Todd spent the next three weeks, branding cattle and fixing fences. It was a quiet and peaceful time, and just what he needed before the NFR. He was growing fond of Molly and her daughter Anna. He tried very hard to make the child smile, but couldn't penetrate her grief.

The night before he was to leave for Las Vegas, Todd and Molly sat on the front porch with a cup of coffee.

"Thank you for all the work you've done. Here's your pay", Molly said handing Todd a check.

"Keep it for now, I'd like to come back after the finals, and finish the fences", Todd replied.

"But that is close to Christmas, and we might have too much snow. We've been lucky so far. Don't you want to be with your family for the holidays?" Molly asked.

"I'll take my chances with the snow, and I've never had a white Christmas", Todd answered.

"Is it alright?"

"Yes", Molly replied a little too gratefully.

Days later Todd was in Las Vegas. He had done very well in the go 'rounds, and if he won this final night, he'd be the PRCA Saddle Bronc Riding Champ.

As he was heading over to the chutes, the bullfighter with the dirty gray Stetson and the horseshoe print stopped him.

"Tom Jarvis just lost the team roping, and he's going to take it out on that mare you saw him beating a month or so ago", the bullfighter said.

Todd shook his head, and started to walk away, when the bullfighter tugged his arm.

"Did you happen to notice the brand on that mare? It's the state of Texas with an L inside".

Shock waves went through Todd's body and he turned to reply to the bullfighter, but he had already walked away.

He didn't have much time before the saddle bronc event, but Todd made a beeline to Tom Jarvis and found him trying to beat the black mare into loading in his trailer. Sure enough, there was the brand. The outline of Texas with an L on the butt end of one of the prettiest little black mares Todd had ever seen...

It was Christmas Eve, and Molly sat on the porch smelling the crisp cold air. It sure smelled like snow, she thought.

The weather had been unusually warm for Idaho this time of year. Perhaps they would have a white Christmas yet.

Her eyes looked down the road to the ranch gate.

If Todd were coming back he would have been here by now. The finals had been over for a few weeks. Todd had won. He had probably found something better to do over the holidays, she thought sadly.

Just as she was turning to go inside, Molly heard a truck crossing the cattle guard. She turned around and saw Todd pulling up with a horse trailer in tow.

"Typical cowboy," she smiled to herself.

"Pullin' a horse even on Christmas Eve."

She couldn't believe how glad she was to see him.

"Hi" Todd said. "I would have been here sooner but I had some business to tend to. Where's Anna? I brought her a little Christmas present".

"She's inside," Molly replied, with the gratitude that he was there showing in her eyes.

As Molly went to get Anna, Todd went to the trailer to unload the precious cargo.

Just as the little black mare backed out of the trailer, Todd heard the delighted squeal of a little girl.

"Romper, you're home, oh Romper!" Anna cried as she flung her arms around her mare's neck.

"Merry Christmas little one", Todd said softly.

"Thank you, thank you", Anna said in between sobs of joy.

The mare nuzzled Anna as only a bonded and cherished horse will do.

"That's why I was late," he told Molly. "Took me two weeks to convince Tom Jarvis this mare was never going to be a roping horse."

Later that night, after Romper had been put in her own stall in the barn, and after Anna had gone to bed, Todd and Molly unhitched the trailer.

Todd went in to sweep it out. He walked out holding a dirty old brown Stetson, with a horse hoof imprint on it.

"Where did that come from?" Molly asked as she grabbed it from Todd's hand.

"Don't know how I got it. It belonged to a bullfighter I got to know. He used it with his clown costume."

"This was Sam's hat," replied Molly, baffled.

"I sat it on his tombstone one day because I didn't know what else to do with it after he died."

Later that night Todd looked out the window at the impending snow. He thought he saw the figure of a bullfighter smile and nod, and then disappear as the first flakes began to fall.