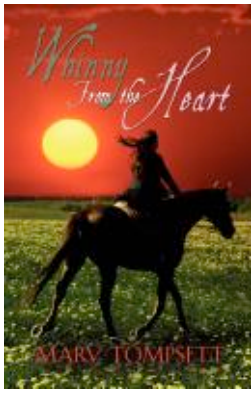




*Whinny
From the Heart*

MARY TOMPSETT



Kitt Burnett survives a Boston fire and rebuilds her life around a childhood love of horses. She takes work at a Midwest resort stable, quickly tumbling off the edge of her limited horse knowledge. Armed with hope and wisecracks in a world of good ol' boys, she wrestles with heavy saddles and her own sagging confidence. Unlikely friendships, romance, and a predatory coworker fill her new life with challenge and self-discovery.

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1

A familiar stickiness nudged Kitt awake. *Uh-oh*. She rolled out from under a cocoon of blankets and off the butt-sized blood stain on her new flannel sheets. *Oh, crap. When will I learn to mark my damn calendar?*

Disgusted, she pranced across the cold floor to her dresser and grabbed a clean pair of panties. At least it was Sunday, so she'd have time to clean up rather than rushing to work, although a glance out the window told her there'd be no rushing anywhere in this blizzard. She shivered. How odd that a memory of Girl Scout campfires should hit her at this moment, for she'd never camped in the winter. Campfires? Smoke! *Oh God*. Tendrils of smoke rose from the living room baseboards.

She dashed to the front door of her apartment and felt the wood—not hot. She slid the deadbolt and opened the door. Thick, acrid smoke billowed up from the stairwell. She slammed the door, panicked. *Holy shit! We're on fire!* Did her third-floor neighbors know about the fire? The Luedtkes across the hall? Mrs. Aiello downstairs?

Running to the bathroom, Kitt tore off her pajama bottoms and threw them into the tub and, not thinking, tossed in the panties she'd been carrying. *Clean it up later!* She yanked the package off the corner shelf and tampons sailed across the room. She plucked a tampon from the floor, and fumbled it in as her bedroom smoke detector began to shriek.

She tore an old bathrobe from the hook on the door and ran to the phone in the living room. In the deepening smoke she coughed, swore again, and dialed 911. She grabbed a throw pillow off the sofa and breathed against it while she waited on the line. Her eyes burned. *Come on, come on, answer!* She ran to the front window and looked down.

"Nine-one-one."

Through the swirling snow she could see the shapes and lights of two fire trucks on the street below.

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"Christ, you're here already?! Never mind!" She dropped the phone and ran to the closet for a coat, her instep landing painfully on a toy mouse.

"Mona! Here, kitty!" Her call triggered a spasm of coughing. She wrestled her winter parka on over her bulky bathrobe sleeves, then jammed her feet into the first pair of boots parked near the door. Her purse! Where did she leave it? In the kitchen? *No, get the cat!*

"Mona!" She choked on her scream and ran back to the bedroom, where each night her Maine Coon slept like a furry striped pinwheel at the foot of her bed. Where was she? Kitt dropped down to look under the bed, but smoke ripped at her eyes, blinding her. She jumped up and gasped for air, coughing. She held her breath, despair and panic squeezing her chest. *Mona, where are you? God, I can't breathe! Get out get out get out!*

She staggered through the living room, now filled with dense smoke. *Ouch!* Her hip rammed into something hard. Her desk? She groped her way toward the kitchen while smoke closed around her like a brown curtain.

Just outside the kitchen window hung the rusty fire escape, bare and puny in the storm. How strong was it? Would it hold her hundred and thirty pounds?

She jerked the old window up a few inches. Immediately the draft sucked choking fumes past her. She grunted and strained, but the window held fast in its layers of paint. She searched blindly for something to break it and bumped her foot against a metal urn, heavy with her stash of quarters. She lifted it to her chest and heaved it. The shower of glass and coins tinkled momentarily and disappeared in the storm's howl.

With her elbow shielded by layers of fabric, she knocked off the glass caught around the edges and scrambled over the sill, blind and gagging. She sprawled on hands and knees on the platform. The steel grating clanged and shook under the sudden weight, and the blizzard swept away her scream. Smoke plumed out above her while the driving snow froze her tears.

Suddenly the fire escape jerked outward several inches with a tremendous shudder. She lost her balance and wailed, certain she

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would die. She tumbled forward and screamed as she slid on outstretched arms down the first few steps. Caught upside down, she shut her eyes against the whirling snow and reeled with dizziness and nausea.

The fire escape shook under the weight of a hulking figure coming up. The fireman reached her, braced his legs on the steps below and pulled her around to a sitting position. On the narrow steps, his air tank screeched against the railing. Together, they inched their way down, step by step, her fingers digging into his thick sleeve. His turnout coat was a different color than Pete's had been. *Now where did that thought come from?*

At the bottom he asked, "Anyone else up there?"

"No, I live alone. But the people across the hall, did they get out?"

"I don't know, we're still checking."

She shivered, and her words rattled out, marbles over ice. "Could you look for my cat? She's still in there."

He nodded and disappeared in the chaos. Dazed and shaky, Kitt approached an older woman among the people gathered on the street.

"Mrs. Aiello! Are you all right?"

"Oh, Kitt!" The two women hugged, Kitt's five-foot-six enveloping her tiny neighbor. "This is so awful. At least my granddaughter left yesterday or—my goodness, you're bleeding!"

Kitt looked at her scraped hands and the strange combination of clothes she wore. A firefighter emerged from the building, peeling off his air mask. Was it *her* fireman? She spotted a bulge in his coat, and hurried over, eyes wide with hope. Mona?? But the Mona-sized lump was only a pair of thick gloves stuffed in a pocket. Kitt's throat ached with the first stranglehold of grief.

A Red Cross worker shepherded the displaced residents into the agency's van. Inside, a man distributed coffee, doughnuts and bags of toiletries. Kitt peered into a bag marked for women: comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, tampons, deodorant, disposable razor, blush and lipstick. *These aren't my brands.* She stared at them dully,

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detached. *Flamingo Pink lip gloss*. Not a good color right now. She needed a *Fire Engine Red*, or maybe *Burnt Copper*.

While the worker dug through a cupboard for sweatsuits and sneakers for everyone, Kitt borrowed a cell phone and arranged for a friend to pick her up. The blizzard had diminished, and she clambered out of the van to wait for her ride. One wall of her building remained, charred beams protruding like the broken ribs of a huge black carcass. She looked up to the space of sky where her three rooms, one bath had been. *Jesus, it's really gone*.

She rearranged the soft bundle of new possessions in her arms. For a split-second it felt like Mona, who had that goofy way of lying on her back to look at the world upside down. But it was a sweat suit. Tears welled up, and she dragged a filthy sleeve across her face, smearing a path through the soot.

When Patti's black Toyota pulled up, Kitt eased herself into the passenger seat. Looking into the eyes of her friend, she allowed the sobs to escape.

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"I just met with Clark, and I have some news." Kitt leaned against the counter in the stable office. Jared propped himself in the doorway and blew cigarette smoke into the morning drizzle outside. Dan sat backwards on an old wooden folding chair, using his pocket knife to trace the cracks and grooves where the grain had split. He sneered. "Clark. What a fairy. He never knows what's going on."

Kitt opened her mouth but Dan edged her out. "Jared, you goin' to the funeral tomorrow?"

"What do you think? 'Course I'm going."

Kitt tried again. "Okay, guys, we have to—"

"How 'bout the lunch after?" Dan spoke without looking up, absorbed in shaving old varnish from the chair with his knife.

Kitt caught Jared's glance at her and she felt her face redden with anger at Dan. *Yeah, he's playing games. Easy, take it easy.* "I need to tell you—"

"Ollie McHenry told my dad the Farmer's Almanac was right about the wet spring we had. You seen Ollie lately?" He looked up at Jared and wiped the knife blade on his jeans.

"Dan." She waited. Finally, he looked up. "Your fly is open."

He darted a look down, and then he and Jared gawked at her with twin expressions of shock.

"Now that I have your attention, may we proceed with what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's fuckin' proceed," said Dan. It was his turn to color with anger.

"Most people wouldn't talk that way to their boss."

They stared at her. Finally Dan said, "You shittin' me? Is this for real?"

"Yes. I mean no, I'm not shitting you. It's for real."

Jared tossed his cigarette out the door and stepped into the room. "You're gonna run the stable?"

She nodded.

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Dan said, "Clark hired *you*?" He loaded the last word with contempt that spilled into his next sentence. "You don't know shit about running this place."

Yep, that's me, she thought, and folded her arms to keep her hands from shaking.

"Do you want to work here, Dan?"

"Don't have much choice at the moment," he muttered.

She looked at Jared. "How about you?" He nodded.

"Good. Let's put feelings aside and find a way to work together. Everyone has skills to offer, and I'll want your ideas along the way. Of course, as manager, I'll have the final word."

"You can play boss," said Dan, "but when you screw up, I ain't savin' your ass. Soon as I turn twenty-one, I'm puttin' in for the job. And I'll get it too."

Oh my, that certainly went well, didn't it?

They reviewed chores to be done. Dan had figured out what was needed to fix the tractor, and would take over the repairs. A dead chipmunk had been found floating in one of the water tubs out back, and over Jared's complaints, Kitt requested the tub be drained and refilled. All the tack needed cleaning.

The confrontation left Kitt with a queasy knot in her gut for most of the day, and it worsened whenever she saw Dan. She would never share the irony with him, but he'd said in anger exactly what she was so painfully aware of: she didn't know shit!

At the end of what should have been her first day off, she left, drained, with a couple of tattered vet supply catalogs she'd found. Reading. Her window to the world, even with horses. It was a far cry from the savvy of younger co-workers who grew up around horses, but maybe she'd learn something. Lord knows, it couldn't hurt.

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Kitt fairly yelped a hello.

"I half expected you to answer the phone with a horse call," said Biff.

"No, not on company time. I only impersonate animals during meals and sex." *Ye gods in purple-blue heavens, what am I saying!?*

Silence.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know where that came from."

Biff gave a low chuckle on the other end. "So how are the new horses?"

New horses? What new.... "Oh, the new horses! Good, good. They're working out very good. No problems at all, everything's good. *Good, schmood, just cut out my tongue, please.* Perhaps one day she'd sustain a conversation with Biff without it deteriorating into the verbal flailing of someone drowning in her own nervous sweat.

She inhaled, exhaled, and leaned against the counter, hoping to fool her body into a relaxed state. "And I want to thank you for sending Liz and Warren our way. They're very goo...um, they're hard workers, and we're happy to have them on board."

"Glad to hear it. In my line of work, I talk to so many folks that sometimes I can play matchmaker, hearing who needs what and who else might have it."

"Sort of a walking bulletin board in leather chaps, huh?"

"Yeah. If only people would go easy with those thumbtacks when they post a notice."

It was Kitt's turn to laugh.

"Well, I did call you for a reason. I wondered if you'd like to get together next Friday night? I have tickets to a local play. Boy, now I can't remember the name of it. Well, anyway, I promise it has nothing to do with horses."

Play?? Mommy salami, can there be more than one play up here now? She cleared her throat and croaked out a *love to*.

"Great. I'll give you a call again next week and we can nail down the details."

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"Nailing details. Now that's a farrier's phrase." The big question reared its head and she grabbed it. "Say, I need to ask you something personal. Are you, ah, involved with Summer? I don't want to find myself in the middle of an awkward situation."

"No, no. We went out a long time ago but that's history. We've stayed good friends, that's all."

She instantly felt taller, as if an invisible weight slid from her shoulders. "Okay. I just had to be sure about where things stood."

"But I do have a thing for Sandra Bullock. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Hmm. Only if she does animal impersonations."

~

Over the weekend, Kitt held the first pony rides on Midnight, Tony, Rocky and Rhythm. With Clark's approval, Felicia became Kitt's eager assistant. The rides didn't require a high level of expertise, but Kitt took time to coach and supervise Felicia on safety rules, how to handle the animals and check equipment. Felicia focused on the task at hand. With purpose and confidence, she clomped around the riding ring with her charges, tassels smacking the sides of her white "pony boots" with each step.

Kitt congratulated herself for hatching an idea that filled an obvious gap for the guests. But she also discovered that the time spent teaching Felicia and watching her rise to a new challenge was even more satisfying.

Midweek, Kitt left the stable at day's end, choosing to walk to her cabin despite a light rain that pattered through the leafy canopy overhead, dampening her clothes and hair. A woodpecker drummed somewhere high and to her right. The forest was peaceful, filled with the myriad small *life is good* sounds of outdoor life.

Marvin came to mind. She'd managed to avoid him for the past few days, and then at lunch she overheard Cindy, one of the waitresses, talk about going to a play with him. What a relief! She felt as though her lie had shrunk, lessening her basic guilt for the lie itself and then another coating of guilt for going with Biff. Now, even if

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their paths crossed, and they certainly could, she'd say plans had changed and another opportunity came up to attend the play.

A toad hopped into her path, and she nudged it toward the roadside. Just then a red pickup rounded the bend in front of her, and she recognized Ray, with Jared in the passenger seat. As they passed, Ray saluted her, his hand wrapped around a slim brown bottle.

She waved automatically before realizing the bottle held beer. *They're done working*, she thought. *They have a right*. Concern pricked at her when she contemplated the poor influence a man like him could have on Jared. Oh well, not her responsibility.

At the cabin, Holly greeted Kitt with a huge grin. "You'll never guess what happened today!"

"From the look on your face, I'll guess it was good."

"Ray asked me out for tomorrow night! I think we're going to the carnival in town. Me and Ray, on the same night that you and Biff are going out! Isn't that funny we have first dates at the same time?"

Kitt swallowed her misgivings and said, "Yeah, quite a coincidence. Well, I'm glad for you."

"He has the coolest eyelashes, don't you think? I wonder if he knows how cute he is." She chattered on about how long it had been since she'd had a date, where would they eat, what she might wear. Then she left to visit her grandmother in Linnis, and Kitt trudged over to the lodge for supper.

The rain had ended by the time Kitt finished supper. In the parking lot, she spotted Marvin hunched over the back window of his Cadillac. Before she could duck behind a row of cars, he looked up.

"There she is, the horse queen of White Buck Lodge!"

Shit. But she smiled in spite of herself. This really was getting ridiculous. How could she steer the conversation down a normal path? His cooking. "Hiya, Marvin. I have to tell you, the smoked ribs at dinner were fantastic."

He leaned against the trunk of his car and eyed her with a cocky grin. "I'd say the ribs right here in front of me look pretty damn good."

Here we go. "Ribs? No, these are exoskeletal anomalies from the crustacean side of the family. My uncle Ted was a Lobster Boy

for Barnum and Bailey.” His blank look fed her soul. She savored it with a smile and turned to go.

"Hold on, there. Can you take a minute to look at something? I need your female opinion." He motioned her over and held up two plastic decals. "I don't know whether they should be facing toward each other or away. What do you think?"

She stared at the hot pink decals, each a curvy silhouette of a big-breasted woman sitting propped against her arms, with one raised knee. The caricature had been around for years, and she mentally retched whenever she saw one plastered on a vehicle. "You aren't really going to put these on, are you? They're sexist and offensive."

"You bet your sweet ribs, I am. The female body is beautiful, and should be noticed and appreciated."

An idea bloomed, one she couldn't turn away. She shook her head gravely as if examining toxic waste. "I guess it takes a while for word to travel from the coast to the Midwest. People around here might not know the difference, but then again—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I shouldn't assume things...I don't know you that well. But I think you want the decals with straight-legged women. Both these little gals have a bent knee." She tapped one of the decals to emphasize her point.

He frowned in concentration. "So? What does it matter?"

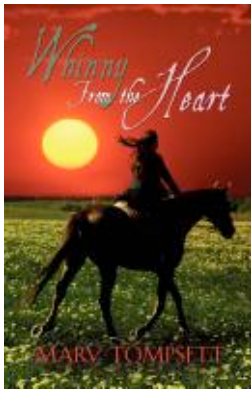
"I thought everyone knew, but...all right, I suppose I should tell you. Straight legs mean the driver is straight. A bent leg is, well...gay or bi-sexual, I forget which."

"I never heard that." A thin edge of doubt bordered his words.

"Like I said, people around here probably haven't heard yet, so it won't matter. Still, you never know...."

"I didn't see any with straight legs." Then, mumbling to himself, "I think I still have the sales slip somewhere."

"And when you find the straight ones, be sure the ladies face each other. The other way means...well, never mind." She shivered in mock disgust, then left him hunched in scrutiny over the decals while she hurried to the woods and laughed all the way home.



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