

The Canadian Horse, continues the story of Rusty Blackstone and Warren Weston from the Rodeo in the Blood series as they grapple with their personal lives as they pursue their ranching and rodeo dreams.

The Canadian Horse

By Jim Overstreet

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BOOK FOUR OF THE RODEO IN THE BLOOD SERIES

THE CANADIAN HORSE

JIM OVERSTREET

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Chapter 1

September 27, 2020

Alberta Rodeo Association Finals

Claresholm Agriplex

Claresholm, Alberta, Canada

C.R. Winchester pulled into the deeper shadow at the east end of the indoor arena at the Claresholm Agriplex and circled around, parking so that his pickup pointed toward the street. This put the back door of his horse trailer toward the stall barns. He had already smeared mud over the license plates so that they were unreadable. The Saturday night rodeo and the banquet that followed had been over for three hours.

Although many of the rodeo contestants were staying on the grounds, C.R. expected that all of them were sound asleep in their trailers. At least he hoped so. Parked along a row of trees beyond the barns, the trailers were out of sight anyway. At 2:17 a.m. even the wind was quiet.

C.R. backed a bay horse out of his three-horse slant-load trailer and led him toward the barns. There was just enough illumination from a mercury vapor lamp at the other end so that he was able to find his way through an open gate and turn into the blackness at the rear of the middle barn. Ahead of him, the back door was open and light from inside made a rectangular patch of yellow on the ground outside. Moving quickly, C.R. entered the lighted alleyway between the box stalls with the horse right behind him.

Briefly, he debated closing the big door at the far end of the alley but decided doing so would increase the risk rather than lower it. *Relax*, he told himself. If someone happened to see him, he wanted to appear casual and not furtive. Counting

down the stalls, he found the one he wanted, led the bay inside and switched his halter to the horse already there. Both horses were bays and had passably similar markings—a star on the forehead between their eyes and a small amount of white on their left hind ankle.

C.R. led his newly acquired horse back out the way he had so recently come in. Outside, at the transition point where light turned to black, the new horse halted. C.R.'s stomach lurched. No matter how big his hurry, he knew he could not drag an unwilling horse. Pausing to give the animal's eyes time to adjust, he heard one of the horses inside nicker excitedly, once, twice, three times. C.R. knew that kind of noise might rouse a nearby horseman from sleep. Instead of panicking, he forced himself to wait a full thirty seconds before he tugged on the halter rope again. When he did, the new horse took a tentative step forward and followed readily enough through the dark.

C.R. loaded him in the trailer, tied him securely, and fastened the back door. The interior light in the cab of the pickup flared as he opened the door but went out when he quickly started the engine. His heart thudded rapidly as the vehicle began to move. He was past the point of no return. The last place he wanted to spend time was in a Canadian prison.

Driving carefully, he eased back onto the paved street, and then turned south on Highway 2, the main north-south corridor in Alberta. Twenty kilometers out of Claresholm, he began to breathe more easily. Ten kilometers farther, he began to grin.

The horse in the trailer belonged to a forty-year-old Canadian steer wrestler named Vernon Chambers. *The guy is an asshole and too old to own a nice horse like this*, C.R. told himself. He had first noticed the horse a year earlier when Vernon was hazing on him in a rodeo at Didsbury, Alberta. C.R. liked the blood bay's looks right off. The horse had a big butt,

a nice head and a shiny coat. He was a bit troubled by all the scary things around the arena, but he showed a lot of speed.

Then, this July C.R. travelled north to compete in a rodeo at Pincher Creek. Vernon was there and he was bulldogging on the horse. He also mounted two younger guys. The horse fussed in the box, even rearing a couple of times, but he ran so quickly past the steers that only Vernon managed to get off at the appropriate time.

At six-foot-two, strong and athletic, C.R. saw himself as a future world champion steer wrestler who only needed a great horse to get him there. He had asked Vernon if the horse was for sale and received a don't-you-wish smile along with a shake of the head.

C.R. lusted after that horse. He dreamed about that horse. He dreamed up a dozen scenarios to obtain that horse. Finally, he hatched a plan to steal him. It was at the Billings horse sale when opportunity fell into his lap. He noticed a bay gelding among the loose horses that looked remarkably similar to the Canadian horse, older but with an uncanny resemblance. C.R. bid more in the auction than he really wanted to, but much less than what Vernon's horse was worth.

Initially, he hadn't planned on substituting horses. All he really needed the old horse for was to get health papers with a description on them that matched Vernon's horse, enabling him to pass through the port of entry at the border. The same papers that got the old horse up, would get the good horse back. The substitution part of the plan came when C.R. decided that an empty stall would arouse suspicion while an occupied stall wouldn't, at least not as quick. He figured if he had any luck, Vernon wouldn't realize his horse was gone until he went to saddle him in the early afternoon before the last performance of the rodeo.

Considering where he was going, the most direct route would have been south from Fort McLeod and through the port of entry at Del Bonita, but it didn't open until 9:00 a.m. and C.R. hoped to be well south of the border by then. Besides there was little traffic through Del Bonita. While at Coutts, there would be a line of both semi-trucks and cars going both directions waiting to get through. Plus, C.R. estimated as many as fifty horses would pass through there in a day. *Good to be lost in the crowd*, he thought.

Figuring that it would look less suspicious for him to show up at the international point of entry in the daylight instead of the middle of the night, C.R. pulled over in the Milk River Visitor Center parking area in the last town north of the border and napped for a few hours.

Later, in the daylight, he arrived at the border with the import form for U.S. Customs all filled out and the health papers in hand. The official looked at the paperwork, frowned and said, "Park and come in."

C.R. said, "You must be new here. If I come in, you would have me fill out a form like that one on top of the pile. You can see it's all filled out."

The officer puzzled over the form for a few seconds and said, "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes sir, I come through here several times every summer."

The official turned away and talked to someone else and then waved C.R. through without viewing the horse.

An outfitter and hunting guide, C.R.'s father, Ruger Winchester, owned a small ranch west of Augusta, Montana where he ran a few cows and the horses for his outfitting business. C.R. knew that his old man would be in hunting camp in the Bob Marshal Wilderness with most of the horses. That was just as well. C.R. didn't want to be answering a lot of

questions. He was not happy to see his mother arrive at the barn just as he was unloading his new horse. There would be questions.

“Wow, he’s pretty,” she said. “Where did you get him?”

“I bought him at the sale in Billings. Would you believe he sold as a loose horse?”

“Does that mean he didn’t cost too much?”

“Not much at all,” C.R. said.

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know,” C.R. answered. “I think I’ll call him Sarge.”

“What are you going to do with him, Colt?”

“How many horses are running out on the Hogback?”

“Five, I think. Julie, Bruce One, Bruce Two and Crackerjack. Julie’s got a baby, you know.”

C.R. said, “I think I’ll turn Sarge out. Give him time to get acclimated here. I’ll borrow Bruce Two for a few days.” Bruce Two was a bay gelding with a star. If anyone came looking around C.R.’s corral because he was on record leaving Canada the morning after Vernon’s horse was stolen, Bruce Two would match the horse described in the health papers close enough, and he wore Ruger’s brand.

September 27, 2020
Hotel Alex Johnson
Rapid City, South Dakota

Rusty Blackstone woke in the middle of the night with an uneasy feeling that he couldn’t account for. He managed to fall back into a restless sleep. Even though he tried to lie quietly so as not to disturb Amanda, he frequently caught himself turning when it was too late to stop. There was no way he could have

known then that events taking place nearly 800 miles away would have serious consequences for him in the future.

Finally, when the numbers on the bedside clock read 6:15, he got up and stretched. At five foot ten and weighing one hundred ninety pounds, he was on the small side for a steer wrestler. He lifted weights regularly and his muscles were twisted tight. He was the consummate competitor and had won two World Championships. As he began to dress, Amanda turned over and sleepily asked, "What are you doing up already?"

"We have a long drive ahead of us."

"But it's our honeymoon. Couldn't we sleep in?"

"Sorry, dear. We've slept in four days in a row. We need to get going. It's probably a twelve-hour drive. I'd like to get you home in the daylight."

Amanda sighed and said, "You're a hard man, Mr. Blackstone."

Rusty grinned. "Yup. That's me."

"Could you dress more slowly?" Amanda asked. "I like looking at you with no clothes on. I like it that all your hair is red. The same color as my horse."

"I'm not as pretty as Bubba," Rusty said, naming her barrel racing horse.

Amanda swung out of bed and said, "You're both beautiful in your own way."

Rusty laughed and slipped into his shirt.

"What about breakfast?" Amanda asked.

Rusty laughed again. "If you hurry, we'll have time to pick up a breakfast sandwich and coffee on the way out of town."

Amanda had squeezed their wedding in between Rusty's rodeos. When she'd suggested the date, he'd replied, "That's fine so long as you don't mind going to the Pro Tour Finale in Rapid City for your honeymoon."

More concerned about the nuptials than the honeymoon, Amanda didn't mind. Besides she was a barrel racer and thought attending a big-time rodeo would be fun. The rodeo had been a family affair with one of Rusty's brothers-in-law hazing for him and the other one mounting on his horse and competing against him in the steer wrestling.

As they started up Interstate 90, Amanda said, "I really like your sisters. It was fun to spend a few days with them. Ruby is so organized. She takes care of everyone. And Corinne, I don't think she realizes how beautiful she is." Amanda reached up and ran her fingers through Rusty's hair and said, "I think it's interesting that you and she both have flaming red hair and Ruby's is almost black. I visited with them briefly at our wedding, but it's been since the rodeo in Kalispell that I spent any time with them. They acted like it hadn't been more than a few days. It's like they've adopted me into the family."

"I was lucky when it came to sisters," Rusty said. "One thing about it. You always know where you stand with Ruby. Corinne is a little more diplomatic."

"Ruby must be really tough. Corinne gave me the details of what happened in Dillon. You told me that the Augustine woman knocked Ruby unconscious and put her in the hospital. You didn't tell me that she checked herself out the next morning and made Bud take her to another rodeo, where she placed in the barrels even though her eyes were nearly swollen shut."

"Yeah, Ruby is something. She has always been physically tough," Rusty said. "One time when we were kids, she got bucked off and broke her arm and tried to pretend it didn't hurt. My mom figured out that something was wrong the next morning at breakfast and drug her to the doctor."

"It must run in the family," Amanda said, looking up at Rusty.

“What did you think of Buckshot?” he asked.

“She seems nice. I don’t know Casey all that well. He’s so quiet. I knew they had a relationship, but I didn’t know it was so serious.”

Casey Jones had been one of Rusty’s traveling partners for several years. In contrast to Rusty’s smaller size, he stood six foot five and weighed about two forty-five. He’d met Buckshot, who stood six foot herself, while he was in Montana the previous summer.

“I think Casey is almost as surprised as you are,” Rusty said. “He’s as good a friend as I’ve got. We’ve spent a lot of time driving to rodeos together these last few years. He’s a great bulldogger, but he’s never been much of a ladies’ man.”

“He seems like a good guy, though,” Amanda said.

“Oh, yeah. One of the best. My mom said she’d pick him over Nick for husband material. He’s easy to get along with, and he’ll stand by you if there’s trouble. I was really glad to see him win the Finale championship.”

“At our wedding, he was moving to head Paul off as soon as he heard the pickup stop,” Amanda said. “He probably saved your life. Maybe mine, too.”

Rusty and Amanda had held their wedding ceremony on horseback. They had no more than finished their vows when Amanda’s ex-husband crashed the party shouting and waving his pistol. Casey and Rusty’s brother-in-law, Warren, had tackled him and held him down until the cops arrived. Fortunately, the single shot that Paul managed to get off missed Rusty. Unfortunately, it struck and killed Rusty’s favorite steer wrestling horse, Apache.

“He remembered Paul and his noisy pickup from the time after the slack at Spanish Fork when he shot out my tire,” Rusty said.

Amanda nodded and said, "Casey is technically not family, but I'm darn glad you brought him to our wedding."

The conversation lagged for a few minutes and then Amanda said, "I've heard you mention Nick plenty of times, but I've never met him. He's your friend who got shot, right?"

"Yup," Rusty said. "He's Casey's cousin and he's a good guy, too. He's a true ladies' man, though. Probably one of the handsomest men you'll ever meet."

"When will that be?" Amanda asked.

"I don't know for sure. The trial for the guy who shot him is coming up soon in Las Cruces. He and Casey will both have to testify. Maybe he will hang around long enough for us to get to New Mexico."

"You want me to go to New Mexico with you?"

"I was hoping you would."

"I'm not sure," Amanda said. "I'm not ready to quit my job, and my obstetrician is in Provo."

"Well, think about it," Rusty said. "You don't have to decide today."

Amanda lay her head on his shoulder and said, "I know you have to get ready for the Finals, but I wish you didn't have to go."

That stopped the conversation until they were well into Wyoming. Amanda asked, "Are you disappointed with the way the rodeo went?"

"I'm a little embarrassed about riding by that first steer," Rusty said.

"You don't have anything to be embarrassed about. You get off on steers that anyone but you would ride past," Amanda said. "Besides you came back and won the second go round."

"That's something," Rusty admitted. "Still, I screwed up and left a lot of money on the table."

An hour south of Gillette, Amanda asked, “What about lunch?”

“Are you hungry already? I was hoping you could hold out until Rawlins.”

“I can try. How long until we get to Rawlins?”

“I’m not sure. Three hours, maybe a little longer.”

Somewhere southwest of Casper, Amanda said, “Damn! I don’t suppose they’ve got any rest stops on this back road. If you see one, don’t drive by.”

“How bad do you have to go?”

“Our daughter is sitting on my bladder. I can’t hold it much longer.”

“I see,” Rusty said. “How about I pull off on the next side-road we come to? We’re pretty much in the middle of nowhere. If you’re quick, you can squat by the back tire.”

“That sounds just like a man,” Amanda said. “It’s not quite so easy for me.”

“Well,” Rusty said a bit defensively, “It’d be better than suffering.”

Amanda got her phone out and called up a maps app. “Let me see if I can locate a rest stop before you make me do anything drastic.”

Amanda, who was peering at her phone, asked, “What road are we on?”

“Highway 220.” Rusty saw a sign that said, Rest Stop 1. He grinned but didn’t tell her. She looked up when Rusty slowed to turn in. Surprised to see the familiar cluster of old-style rest area buildings, she said, “Oh, thank God. I’m about to pee my pants.”

With an emergency averted, they used the facilities and lingered a few minutes gazing at Independence Rock and reading information about the Oregon Trail. Rusty shook his head and said, “I can’t imagine traveling across this

godforsaken country in a covered wagon. Those folks must have been tough.”

Amanda said, “My ancestors came across here in the 1850s. On their way to Utah. I’m not sure which year. I think they followed the Oregon Trail to Fort Bridger and then turned south.”

On Interstate 80, west of Rawlins, Amanda fell asleep. She woke up feeling sad. She snuggled closer to Rusty and said, “I know I’ve said it before, but I’m so sorry about Apache. I loved him. Not as much as you, but I loved him. I feel like it was my fault.”

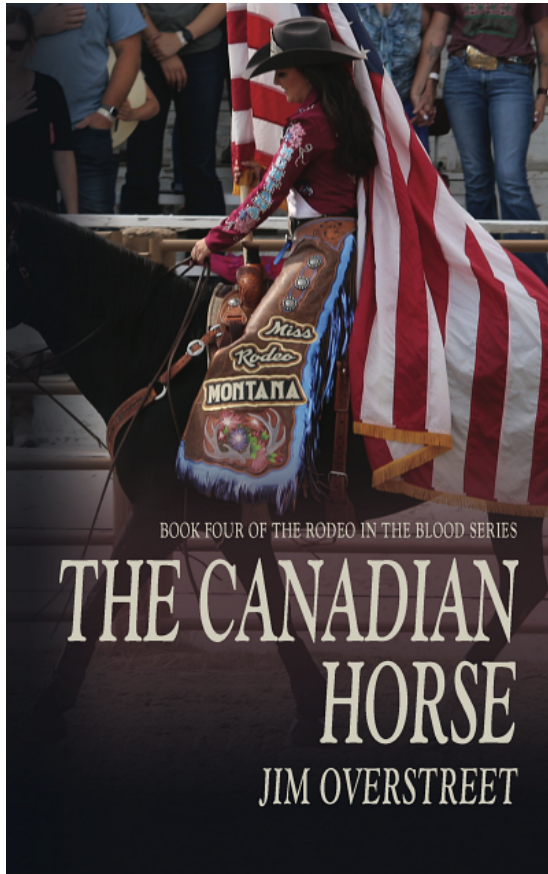
“What do you mean, your fault?”

“If I hadn’t married Paul in the first place, it wouldn’t have happened.”

“You can’t think like that. If one thing had been different maybe everything would be different. Maybe I’d have never met you,” Rusty said. “Apache was a great horse. If I hadn’t had him, I’d have never won my World Championships. But I’d have traded him for you any day.”

Amanda’s tears began to fall. Rusty felt the little jerks in her body and asked, “Are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” Amanda said. “It’s being pregnant that makes me so emotional. But I know about men and their favorite horses. That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”



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