

She thought Jordan Valley was the perfect place to hide from those who threatened to tear her apart. Maybe she was wrong.

# *Jordan Valley Roundup*

Susan Spess



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## *Dedication*

Jordan Valley Roundup is dedicated to my Forever  
Friend, Dr. Cathy Sneed Barkley.  
Growing up together was so much fun.  
Thank you for always being there.

# 1

*Do they still hang horse thieves in Oklahoma?*

Jessie Cobler stood in her stirrups as she searched the sea of cowboy hats. Chances that she'd be able to pick Tank's dirt-colored-beat-up-nearly-beyond-recognition Stetson out of a crowd were a hundred to one. Even in the rodeo arena of the small northeast Oklahoma town of Jordan Valley, there were just too many. But she had to keep on the lookout.

There were hundreds of rodeos across the country, and she had no ties to Oklahoma. But hiring someone to find her—a lot of someones—he could do that.

Her stomach tensed at the thought. More likely, though, he'd just sicced the cops on her.

As the competitor ahead of her in the lineup circled the final barrel and headed for home, the old exhilaration kicked in, winning out over the burning anxiety about Tank. The thrill of anticipation started in her spine, spread through her legs, arms, and chest. She tensed, gripped the reins, and settled deep in the saddle.

Buck tensed his muscles in his ready-to-run dance. She stroked his neck and murmured, "Hang on, boy. It's nearly time."

Focusing on the ride, she walked Buck into position. The excitement built, adrenalin shooting

through her muscles like lightning strikes. Tugging her Stetson low so there was no chance of losing it, she leaned into the saddle, took a firm grip on the reins, inhaled, and blew it out long and slow until her lungs were empty. Finally, she booted him in the ribs.

He took off in an explosion of energy while she leaned into the run. She concentrated on the first barrel, the cheers of the crowd dimming to near silence. Spectator faces blurred past as they rounded the second barrel. Yes! It felt good. This was where she belonged.

Buck ran flat out as they charged the third turn. Heading into the pocket, he dug in, and the world shifted. Dipped. She snatched a breath and held tight to the saddle horn, her heart pounding as he fought for footing in the loose earth. She gave him his head, hoping, by some miracle, he could stay on his feet.

Buck's back left leg slid from under them. Fear ripped through her as they dropped, then slammed into the ground. The saddle horn jerked from her grip.

He floundered, trying to get up. She kicked her foot free and tried to shove away from the panicked animal, but she couldn't move. Her left leg was under him. Stories of riders killed from similar falls flashed through her mind.

Buck fought his way to his feet, yanking her leg high in the air with her foot through the stirrup and leaving her head on the ground. His shod hooves cut so close, he kicked dirt in her face as he danced with anxiety.

If she could catch her breath, make him hear her,

he might calm. But she couldn't breathe. Couldn't find words to ease him.

He threw his head back, gathering himself as he looked for a way to escape the nightmare.

Slamming shut her eyes, she wrapped her arms around her head. *God! Help me.*

"Whoa! It's all right, fella."

The man's soothing voice calmed her. Peeking from between her arms, she saw a cowboy with dark red hair taking his life in his hands. *No! Getting in front of a panicked horse is suicide.* She struggled to form the words, but he stepped in front of Buck and grabbed the bridle. "You're all right, boy. Shhhh."

Buck quivered all over, but the stranger in the black hat released one hand to stroke his neck.

Cowboys who'd been watching from the nearby arena fence surrounded her, released her foot from the stirrup, and helped her to stand. Weak as water, she had to stiffen her knees so that she could walk.

She had to see about Buck. What would she do if she'd seriously injured him? Had she stolen him just to have to put him down? Quelling the sobs gathering inside her, she dragged in a rough breath and stumbled to the man at Buck's head. "Is he OK?"

He kept stroking Buck's neck, his hands gentle but firm. "He's skittish as a green-broke colt. Can you take his head?"

With a nod, she threaded her fingers through the bridle. The man moved to Buck's side, the fringe on his chaps swinging with each step. He ran his hands down each of Buck's legs. "I think he's all right."

Her frozen insides started to melt at his words. As she blew out her pent-up breath, a knife jabbed her in the ribs. The fall must have been harder than she realized. She slid her fingers over the hurt. No blood. That was a good thing.

The man took his gaze from Buck for the first time to glance at her with eyes as green as tree leaves. "You all right?"

She took a breath, and the knife poked harder. Better not breathe too deeply. "I'm fine."

She grabbed her hat from one of the cowboys, said, "Thanks!" and walked with the man as he led Buck out of the arena. Her rescuer gave her a long look, his mouth quirking on one side. "It's a blessing you were wearing full cowboy boots and not those short-topped things. Probably protected you from a break or a bad sprain anyway."

"Too bad they were ropers." *And hand-me-downs.* "If I'd had more heel, I might not have hung there like the laundry."

His chuckle sent a smile curling through her. She looked at him more closely: square jaw, broad, muscled shoulders, and just a few inches taller than her five-foot-four-inch frame. He looked more like a working cowboy than a rodeo dandy. "I'm sorry. I don't think I caught your name while you were rescuing us."

His mouth lifted into a slow smile, exposing a slight dimple in his left cheek as he extended his hand. "Mitch Tanner."

She placed her hand in his. "Jessie Cobler. Glad to



meet you since you probably saved my life.”

He had a comfortable laugh, like well-worn denim. “My pleasure.”

Keeping their gazes on the ground so they wouldn’t step in ever-present horse piles, they circled the calf pens. The bawling and harsh odor made her wish she could walk faster, but with the pain in her side, she might not be able to draw a breath at all if she did.

They wound their way through pickup trucks of every make and model from old ones held together with baling wire to brand new ones, driven, no doubt, by drugstore cowboys who stuffed their jeans into their boots and pretended they knew which side to mount a horse. Now and then, they passed a car in the lot, but it wasn’t often.

When they finally reached her rig, parked at the far edge so she wouldn’t have to try to force the sawdust-and-a-prayer transmission into reverse, a woman behind them somewhere called his name. “Mitch Tanner, where are you?”

“Sounds like Mom.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Over here, Mom.”

“Mitch. Is she all right?” A woman with hair the color of Mitch’s, wearing faded jeans and a pearl snap shirt, hurried toward them. Her age was hard to guess, but the resemblance was remarkable.

“Well, she’s walking. And talking.” With a raised eyebrow and a teasing grin, he lifted the stirrup and hooked it on the horn. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“Brat.” The woman glared at him as he worked

and then turned to Jessie. "Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm fine." *Except I can barely breathe.*

"Thank you, Jesus."

Jessie's scalp prickled at the woman's words. She sounded as if she were praying.

"Meet my mother, Retta." When he'd released the cinch, he lifted the saddle and pad. "Mom, this is—"

"Jessie Cobler. I know. I was in the stands." Retta winked at Jessie and stepped close to Buck to run soft hands over his withers and down his back. "Is this big boy all right?"

Jessie nodded. "I-I think so." *Hope so. Vets are too expensive. And somebody might have been warned about a stolen buckskin.*

While Mitch stowed her saddle, Retta led Buck a few steps and then glanced at her. "What about you? Do you hurt anywhere? Double vision? Head pain?" Without waiting for an answer, she gripped Jessie's shoulder, slid her palms down her elbow and over her wrist, and then turned her to check the other arm.

Just when she thought she was home free, Retta fitted her hands along her ribcage. The knife in her side turned into an ax and struck hard. Jessie fought the gasp rising to her lips as stars danced in her vision. Thankfully, the woman didn't notice her tension, but then she'd spent the last few years learning to hide her feelings. Apparently, she'd learned the lesson well.

"It feels as though nothing is broken on either of you, but I'd be willing to bet you're both bruised pretty good."

Struggling to keep the pain from showing in her

face, Jessie shrugged and shook her head.

Retta's brows drew together, concern filling her gaze. "So where are you staying? Do you have a place?"

Hoping she wouldn't actually have to lie, Jessie made a vague motion. "Oh, yeah. No problem."

Retta looked over the rusted horse hauler and then the old truck. "Look at me. Are you sleeping in here?"

*Either in there or on the ground next to it.* Jessie cleared her throat and shifted her gaze away from Retta's face. Lying wasn't easy for her. Maybe the fading light would help hide her deceit. "N-no. I'm staying out." She waved to the east, hoping she looked sincere.

Streetlights blinked on as Retta slipped her arm around Jessie. Guilt settling back in its accustomed place, Jessie had a sudden urge to blurt out the truth. All of it. She clenched her jaw to keep it inside.

Gaze widening a bit, Retta looked at her son. "Mitch, I'm taking this girl to the house for a home-cooked meal and a good night's rest. You bring my truck when you come."

"You're what?" His beautiful voice was no louder than before but intense. Eyes clouding, he clenched his jaw and stared at his mother for a long moment.

Jessie tensed for an explosion, but it didn't come.

"No!" Jessie all but shouted. What was this woman thinking? "No. I-I have a place."

"Not where you'll have someone to take care of you and feed you like I will."

*But if I get caught, you could be in trouble for helping*

*me. Aiding and abetting's what they call it on TV. Or is it accessory after the fact? Whatever, it's never good. "Really. We'll be fine."*

Retta caught and held her gaze. "Listen to me. After a fall like that, Buck needs loving care and nourishing food."

*Not time in a rusty trailer, bumping over rough roads, rushing to the next rodeo. Jessie's throat ached as she fought the tears.*

"And we can help you keep an eye on him. Together we'll watch for signs of trauma. Do it for Buck." Retta's brow puckered with sincerity as if she really wanted them to stay.

For Buck. He was why all this started. She couldn't deny him adequate care now. And she couldn't give it to him by herself. Not with her side hurting with every breath.

Besides, Tank wouldn't know where to look for them. No matter how much he hunted, it would be harder to find them on someone's ranch than hanging out in town or at the rodeo grounds. Forcing a smile, she nodded.

Retta threw Mitch her keys, which he caught as if he'd expected the toss. "I'll see you at home. Have a good ride."

His only response was dead silence, but his jaw muscles flexed as if he was clenching his teeth to keep from saying something.

Retta eased Jessie into the passenger side of the truck and held out her hand for the key. "Oh, Mitch. Load Buck for us, would you?"

Uneasy, Jessie buckled her seatbelt. What was she doing, going with this woman? Aunt Janell had warned her about strangers from the time she was too small to reach the stirrups on a Shetland. Of course, you'd have to go a long way to find anyone stranger than Tank, and he'd been all Janell's fault.

Now she was going home with a woman she'd only met moments before. Maybe her ribs *hadn't* been the only thing damaged in that fall. Seemed like her brain might have been scrambled, too. But what choice did she have?

She'd stay to make sure Buck was all right, and then she'd go, get far away. And hopefully, before the authorities caught up. She had to get back to rodeoing as soon as she could. It might be risky, but it was the only way to earn enough money to take care of Buck.

When Buck was loaded, Retta put the truck in gear. With a huge shudder, they drove out of the parking lot as *déjà vu* settled in. Another rerun in the life of Jessie Cobler, looking back over her shoulder for the authorities.

"Are you sure you're feeling OK?" Retta asked. "You look a little piqued."

Jessie took her time shaking her head. Her neck was a little sore from the fall, but not enough to see a doctor. "I'm fine."

"Well, let me know if anything starts paining you," Retta replied as she turned onto what looked like the main drag in town. "You never know after a fall like that."

Nodding, Jessie relaxed against the seat.

“That’s Sparkle over there.” Retta tipped her head toward a building on the opposite side of the street that looked as if it were a hundred years old. “Halle, the woman who owns it, is just as sweet as she can be. I hoped one of my boys would be interested, but I’m afraid she’s like a sister to them.”

She steered the truck down an adjacent street. “That’s Blackjack House, the best full menu restaurant in town,” Retta murmured with a nod toward a freestanding rock building. “We’ve had a running tab there since my boys were in school, so if you’re ever hungry, feel free to...”

She closed her eyes, hoping Retta would think she’d fallen asleep, stomach tightening as memories flooded back. Happier days when Aunt Janell had driven her to rodeos, and it had been just the two of them. Days before Tank. And the illness.

She couldn’t tell if it took an hour to get to the Tanner ranch or five minutes, but a jolt startled her as they pulled off the county road onto the ranch road. She couldn’t see a lot by moonlight, but the pastures lining the road were dotted with horses, and the outbuildings looked as if they were kept in good repair. They pulled to a stop in front of the rambling, two-story house.

The place might not be luxury, but it would do until luxury came along. The drive in front of the house circled back to the road, with white pipe fences lining every inch of the way.

Jessie stepped out of the truck onto a sidewalk made of large flat stones with small objects set in the

concrete—marbles of all sizes and colors, jewel-toned bottles, a belt buckle, small toys including a miniature horse, and various other things.

Seeing her stare, Retta smiled. “My husband and I built that sidewalk when the boys were small. They wanted to help, so we let them.”

“You mean you actually...” Manual labor? A woman with all this?

“It’s no big deal. Mixing cement’s a whole lot like making oatmeal. You just have to get the proportions right.” She touched Jessie’s elbow. “Let’s go inside. I’ll ask the boys to take care of Buck for us.”

She followed Retta right up the steps to the large front porch where several mismatched rockers swayed in the breeze.

Retta opened the big, unlocked wooden door and swept Jessie inside to the most comfortable room she’d ever seen in her life. A rock fireplace took up most of one wall. Three full couches sat in the room as well as several upholstered chairs.

Another wall held family pictures. Groups, individuals, even pets graced the room in frames that didn’t match. It seemed it didn’t matter if the photographs were snapshots or done professionally. They were displayed with pride.

And everything in the room, except the pictures and the fireplace, had a quilt on it. A Texas Lone Star quilt hung on a wall, the only pattern she knew the name of, but the rest looked soft. Cuddly. As if they’d been used and well cared for. They were on racks, on shelves, tables, and one or two on each couch.

When Jessie finally stopped gawking and made her way entirely into the room, Retta slammed the door. "Hey! Where is everyone?"

The clatter of boot heels thumped the floors above them. A young man who might have been college-age wore the first pair to come into the room. His hair was the same color as Retta's and Mitch's.

"Hi, Mom." He gave his mother a quick hug before turning shy attention to Jessie.

"Lincoln, this is Jessie Cobler. She's staying with us for a few days. Her horse is in the trailer out front. Would you take him to the stable, please?"

The young man frowned in response, his gaze flashing to her. After what seemed an eternity, he lifted his mouth in a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He cleared his throat and nodded slightly. "Nice to meet you."

As he headed for the front door, two more young men, just a few years older than the first, entered the room. This pair not only looked like Retta, but they also looked exactly like each other.

"Garrett, Shane, this is Jessie Cobler." Retta flashed a proud smile. "Jessie, these are my twins."

"I was afraid I'd gone cross-eyed." As the words slipped out, Jessie wanted to slap a hand over her mouth, but it was no use. She knew from the past that her tongue was quicker than her hand.

Retta laughed as if delighted. "I guess it is kind of startling to have all that red hair and good looks coming at you."

Good looks, for sure. These two looked as if they



belonged in a magazine ad.

“I’ll bet you’re hungry, Jessie.” Retta gave the guys a stern look. “You go help your brother stable Jessie’s horse while I feed her.”

With a little good-natured grumbling, the twins left the same way as Lincoln.

Retta led Jessie into a kitchen filled with copper and brick and incredible fragrances. The dark, rich scent of coffee lingered but was quickly overtaken with peppery spiciness as she neared a box filled with herbs growing in the window above the sink.

Retta gave her a warm smile. “Sit down at the table. I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

*Not bologna. Please, God. Don’t let it be bologna.* Jessie wandered to the round table that looked as if it had been hacked from oak a hundred years earlier and pulled out a chair.

Retta hummed tunelessly as she bustled around the kitchen, opening the refrigerator and slicing stuff on the old butcher’s block standing in the middle of the room like a mini-island. Soon she set a glass of milk in front of Jessie and a plate with a sandwich big enough for three men.

“I hope you like milk.”

*Beats the heck out of a steady diet of water.* “Yes, ma’am. I do.” Unable to wait another moment, Jessie grabbed the sandwich and took a giant bite of roast beef, tomato, lettuce, and homemade bread. *Oh, thank you.* She closed her eyes as she ate. Aunt Janell’s roast beef was the only thing she’d ever eaten that tasted this good, and it’d been a long time. Before the cancer.

She'd thought her idea to buy bargain bologna and keep it in her ice chest while she traveled was a great one, but bologna three times a day... On her way here, she'd prepared it every way possible *and* eaten it cold on bread, by itself, and with crackers. If she ever saw a slice of bologna again, she'd likely scream and run the other way.

Jessie nodded now and then while Retta chatted, but her mind stayed fixed on her sandwich. Even when her belly filled and she knew she should stop eating, she couldn't.

If she'd been a horse, she'd have foundered right then and there. She might be awake all night with colic, anyway.

When she'd finished the sandwich and the entire glass of milk, Retta smiled at her. "Would you like another?"

*Can I take it to go?* "No, thanks. I've had plenty." She tried to look casual as she leaned toward the woman. "Thank you. I haven't eaten anything so good in a long time."

With a chuckle, Retta brushed her comment aside. "While you're here..."

Warmth flooded over Jessie. *While I'm here? Who wouldn't love to stay on a beautiful ranch like this with a home and a real bed? But no way. The longer I stay anywhere, the more chance there is that Tank can find me and Buck. Besides, how could I pay this good woman back for everything?*

Finally, Retta took Jessie's dishes to the sink, rinsed them, and put them in the dishwasher. "I'll bet

you're worn out."

Jessie pushed to her feet, and exhaustion hit her full force. "I drove all night to get here in time for the rodeo."

"You must be ready to go to bed—"

The front door slammed, cutting off her words.

"Mom?"

Mitch. Jessie couldn't mistake that voice for anyone else's. With it, he'd miraculously calmed Buck and saved her life. These brothers might look alike, but only one of them sounded as if he could charm an apple out of a peach tree.

"Oh, good. There's Mitch." Retta grabbed Jessie's wrist and towed her out of the kitchen to greet him. "How was the ride?"

His green gaze settled firmly on his mother as if he didn't want to acknowledge Jessie's presence. "I didn't do too bad. That bull was pretty rank, though." As he spoke, he glanced at Jessie as if he just couldn't help it.

"I hope you had a good ride, anyway." Retta hugged him. "Why don't you show Jessie the apartment over the stable? She's worn out. We can talk in a bit."

After a long moment, his mouth lifted into that incredible half-smile, and he nodded. "Sounds good."

Retta dropped her voice to a loud whisper as she walked with Jessie to the door. "There's a huge shower up there, as well as a big tub with plenty of bubble bath. Feel free to use anything you want."

A shower *and* a tub? Lately, she considered a hose or gas station sink—anything not splashed out of a

bottle—a blessing. This would be heaven.

Mitch took Jessie out a side door and down a sidewalk, leading past several low pathway lights. “I’ll bet you want to check on Buck before you go up.”

“I’ll rest better if I do.” As if anything short of a buffalo stampede through the room could keep her awake tonight.

The stable was big enough to hold a whole herd of horses, but with the weather as nice as it had been, it wasn’t full. The scent of dusty hay and horses greeted her. Their steps were muffled by straw on the floor as they passed several sleeping horses. Buck, however, was awake. He held his head high, watching for her. He knew she wouldn’t go to bed without seeing to him.

Especially after what he’d been through.

When she saw his light tan hide and dark brown mane and tail, something inside her relaxed. As her new-fence-tight nerves unwound, she realized just how keyed up she’d been. She hurried toward him. Her chest tightened, making it hard to draw a full breath as tears burned behind her eyes. She was hiding from the police and putting this family in jeopardy to save him. He just had to be all right. “Are you *sure* he’s OK?”

“As sure as I can be without an X-ray.” Mitch tipped his hat up a notch with one finger as they arrived at the stall. “From what I saw, he’s not limping or showing any other signs of trauma. Might have a sore muscle or two, though.”

He slid open the gate for her, and she threw

herself at Buck, latching on around his neck. His musky smell and low whicker set everything to rights.

~\*~

Mitch closed the stall behind his mother's latest lost lamb. Mom had taken people in to give them a helping hand before—God gifted her with more than her share of hospitality—but this was different. The lambs she had helped before were acquaintances. Someone they'd known, at least in passing. Or they were known by a mutual acquaintance. But this woman was a complete and total stranger. What was his mother thinking?

Jessie wound her arms around the buckskin's neck and hugged him. Funny how close in color her hair and his mane were. Was it the chocolate color that drew them together?

Would she ever stop loving on that horse? Just as he was about to clear his throat to remind her he was waiting to show her the way to her bed for the night, she finally let go and turned to look at him, a timid smile on her face. He led her to the stairs to the apartment they kept ready.

As he walked, he thought about his mother's huge heart. She must have thought Jessie an extreme emergency. She'd missed his ride tonight for one of the few times since the accident. And that evening, he'd drawn Black Ace—a.k.a. Death Card—one of the meanest bulls on the circuit. The size of his horns alone was enough to stop a strong man's heart. And with