

"Maybe the Lazy M is small in comparison to Hacienda Tejada, but it's profitable and has earned a number of awards."

Rosita smiled. "You don't have to get so defensive. I wasn't insulting the ranch. I like it."

Billy sat down and leaned back against a tree, and Rosita sat down on the grass in front of him. "It's pretty out here," she said as she glanced around.

Billy nodded. "Yeah, one of my favorite spots."

"So what did you do today?"

Billy took off his hat and twirled it in his hands. "Fed the horses, then went into town and had lunch with my mother. You?"

"I went to church with Dad and Addie." She plucked a tiny purple wildflower from the grass and studied it, careful not to gaze at Billy. "I really enjoy their small church. The people are so friendly, but I'm sure you know that."

After clearing his throat, Billy said, "Yeah, I know several of the people who go there; they're very nice."

Billy's voice sounded pinched. Rosita picked at the petals of the tiny flower.

"So you don't go to church there?"

"I don't know what it is with you but you seem to have a way of taking a conversation to a personal level before a fellow knows what's hit him."

This time Rosita looked directly at Billy. "You think where a person goes to church is personal?"

Billy stood and stretched his back. "I think how a person believes is his own personal business."

Beneath the Texas Sky

by

Kassandra Elaine

A Lazy M Ranch Book

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Beneath the Texas Sky

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Contact Information:
titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing,
a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.whiterosepublishing.com
PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2009
Print Edition ISBN 0-9712522-2-X

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to our loyal fans.
Thank you for all your support, encouragement,
and patience as we all waited
for the next book to be published.
We also want to thank our editor, Lori Graham.
We appreciate your guidance and assistance. Without
you, we might not have written
this particular story.

Chapter One

*Fort Worth Equestrian Arena
Fort Worth, Texas*

Billy checked the cinch on the saddle one more time. His boss, Skylar Carlisle, would be mounting Skylark's Son in just a few moments to compete in the jumping event. All the tack had to be perfect. Billy might just be a ranch hand right now, but he did his job the best he knew how. Looking to his left, he saw Skylar, her husband Duke, and the foreman, Redigo, talking. Actually, it looked like they might be praying, as was their custom before Skylar participated in any event.

Billy shook his head. He didn't put much store in prayer, or God for that matter, at least he hadn't for quite a while. He figured you did the best you could. If things worked out, fine; if not, you suffered the consequences.

"Hey, Billy, how's everything with you?" Dan Tate, Skylar's friend, peered over the back of Skylark's Son at him. "Think Skylar's going to take first place again?"

Billy rubbed the horse's neck before he answered Dan's question. "Wouldn't be surprised if she does. She and this horse are of the same mind once they take to that course."

Dan laughed. "You're right about that."

"Hello, Deputy Dan." Skylar approached the men.
"Come to see me win again?"

"You're awfully sure of yourself, Mrs. Carlisle. From what I've seen, you have some real competition this year."

Smiling, Skylar answered, "Yes, I do, but I've got Skylark's Son. We won't be easily beaten."

"Someone questioning whether or not my lovely wife will win today?" Duke asked as he walked up and put his arm around Skylar's shoulders.

"Just one of the Denton County deputies." Skylar smiled. "I know for a fact this man knows nothing about horses."

"Now, wait just a minute; I grew up on a ranch. I know horses; it's women I don't know much about. Ask Trina 'cuz I know my wife will confirm it." Dan rolled his shoulders a bit. "I know Skylark's Son is capable of winning, but I'm not so sure about his rider."

Everyone laughed as Skylar slapped Dan on the shoulder.

The camaraderie of the people standing around him and Skylark's Son made Billy feel isolated.

Alone.

He envied the warm relationship the group had with one another. They were family. Something he missed. Shaking off the blanket of gloom threatening to shroud him, Billy decided to break up the little reunion.

"You folks can stand here and gab all you want, but I'm taking this horse down to the starting area." Billy looked at his watch. "If you want him to have a chance to win, then his rider had better be close behind

me."

Billy led the horse away from the group. He paused about fifty feet from the starting area and waited for Skylar to join him. As the moments passed, he noticed a well-dressed man walking toward him. Billy didn't know him and hoped the man just kept on walking. He didn't feel like chatting with show-jumping groupies. Billy stifled a groan as the man stopped in front of Skylark's Son.

"Good morning, son. Fine looking animal you have there."

Billy only nodded and stroked the animal's mane as Skylark's Son pawed the dirt. Billy wished the man would take his pressed, dark gray suit back to the stands. His presence made Son antsy.

"This is the entry from the Lazy M Ranch, isn't it?"

Again, Billy nodded.

"Fellow by the name of Redigo used to work there; is he still employed at the Lazy M?"

"He's the foreman." Billy's irritation rose a notch. What was with all the questions?

"I understand he's one of the best horse trainers in the country."

"Not one of the best; he *is* the best."

The man looked over the horse's back at Billy. Taking a step forward, the man spoke in a quiet voice as though trying not to startle the animal. The stranger got close enough to gently stroke the horse's neck then place his hand on the saddle all while asking Billy a few more questions about the ranch and its owner. This guy's probing questions made him sound like a reporter. Was he looking for something in particular?

A sound from behind him drew Billy's attention.

Skylar approached them. Good; let her take care of

Mr. Curiosity. "Here comes the owner of the ranch now. She's also the one who will be riding today."

The man smiled. "Well, I'll have to meet her later. I've got to be on my way." He hurried across the grass toward the viewing section.

"Who was that?" Skylar asked.

"Don't know. Didn't get his name. He was asking about Redigo and the ranch."

Skylar glanced toward the man. "I hope he doesn't think he can steal my foreman." Reaching for the reins, she said, "Thanks, Billy. I'll take him from here."

Billy searched the viewing section the stranger had walked toward, but the man had disappeared into the crowd of faces. Billy shrugged and found a place at the fence to watch Skylar put Skylark's Son through his maneuvers.

A few minutes later, Skylar rode Skylark's Son into the arena. Billy leaned against the rail and watched as Skylar moved her horse through the course. So far, it had been a clean run. If she kept Skylark's Son running at this pace, the horse and rider team would be on top of the leader board and would take home top honors once again.

As Skylark's Son took the next jump, Skylar grabbed hold of his mane and Billy saw a look of panic flash across his boss's face. When the horse cleared the jump, Billy saw the saddle slip, dumping Skylar to the ground. A collective gasp, followed by silence, rippled through the crowd. For a moment, time stopped and the only sound came from Skylark's Son's pounding hooves as he ran around the edge of the course.

Billy vaulted over the fence and ran toward Skylar. Footsteps echoed behind him as Duke and Redigo ran across the course. They all converged on Skylar at the

same time. She lay face down in the dirt; her right arm hidden beneath her.

"Skylar..." Duke's voice broke as he said her name.

Billy looked at Duke. His love and concern for his wife painted his face. He must be terrified for her at this second.

"Come on, Skye, open your eyes." Redigo's words betrayed his fear as well.

Billy's breathing felt restricted. His boss had landed hard. Her breath had been knocked out of her; that's all it was. It had to be. He kept repeating the phrase over and over, willing it to be true.

The paramedics, who were always waiting in case of such an accident, rushed into the arena, their supply boxes rattling in tempo with their footsteps. The older one, a portly guy with gray hair, set his kit down and tried to move Billy, Duke and Redigo back. His partner, a young woman with black hair, maneuvered her way between the men to get to Skylar.

"I need you people to move out of the way, so we can work," the female paramedic said.

Billy and Redigo stood and took a step back. Duke remained kneeling.

"This is my wife."

"I understand, sir, but you'll have to step away while we do our assessment."

Duke's expression darkened as he stood, his hands balling into fists. Billy figured Duke was about to get into trouble, so he laid his hand on Duke's shoulder.

"Come on, Duke, let them do their work."

Duke eyed him, then nodded and stepped back.

"What's her name?" the male paramedic asked.

Duke told him. The burly paramedic joined his

partner as they took Skylar's vital signs. A few seconds later, Skylar groaned.

Billy took a breath. Groaning was good. At least she was alive. The concerned looks on Duke's and Redigo's faces relaxed a bit.

"Ma'am, can you tell me your name?" the female paramedic asked.

"Skylar Carlisle."

The boss sounded a bit breathless.

The paramedics asked her a series of ordinary questions, which made no sense to Billy. What difference did it make if Skylar knew what the day was or the name of the current president? A short while later, the paramedics rolled Skylar onto a backboard. Skylar emitted a moan as her position changed. The man used a small flashlight to look into her eyes. After another series of questions, the younger paramedic immobilized Skylar's arm and the two lifted her onto a gurney.

Turning to Duke, the male paramedic told him, "We're going to transport her to the hospital."

"Which one?" Duke asked.

The man answered him and then turned to help his partner move the gurney to the ambulance.

One of the officials walked toward them with the saddle on his arm and Skylark's Son in tow.

"What happened to the saddle?" Redigo snapped around to pin Billy. "I saw it slip when she started over that jump."

Realization snaked through Billy. His mouth turned as dry as North Texas dirt in July. "I...I don't know. It was fine when I saddled Son."

"The cinch appears to have broken," the event official said.

Redigo knelt to check Skylark's Son's legs.

"Billy, get Skylark's Son back to the stable, then load him and his tack up, and head for the ranch. I'm taking Duke to the hospital. We'll call when we know something about Skylar."

Redigo took two steps and called back over his shoulder, "And I want to talk with you when I get back to the ranch."

"Yes, sir." That statement did nothing to relieve the dryness in Billy's mouth.

Duke and Redigo left the arena moving at a fast trot. Billy took Skylark's Son's reins and tack from the official. "Thanks. I'll take care of him now."

The official nodded and walked away, obviously satisfied with the reason for Skylar's accident. Billy watched Skylark's Son as they went to the stables. He moved without favoring any leg. After dropping the saddle on top of the trunk, Billy tied the reins to a post.

Billy placed their gear in the small tack room of the horse trailer before he moved Skylark's Son into it. Climbing into the cab of the pickup, he drove away, stopping only at the office to check them out.

"Sure hope Skylar's not hurt too bad," the receptionist said.

"Thanks. Me too." Billy tipped his hat.

The rock music blaring through the speakers in the truck aggravated Billy's already taunt nerves. He flicked the radio off with a sharp twist of his wrist. Maybe Redigo was right when he said rock music irritated the horses. Billy gave a wry grin. Not that he'd admit it to Redigo's face, but the man was usually right when it came to what was best for the horses in his care.

The drive back to the ranch seemed to take twice

as long as it should have. Redigo's stern look let Billy know the foreman blamed him for the broken cinch. He couldn't understand it; the cinch had shown no apparent wear when he had saddled the horse.

How could he have missed it? Billy sighed. If the accident was his fault, he'd more than likely lose his job. Redigo didn't stand for sloppiness around the ranch. You did your job and did it right, or else.

No job.

No references to find a new one.

No last semester of college.

Not that Redigo would care about the college part—even if he knew. Which he didn't.

Billy hadn't told anyone at the ranch he was taking classes. No real reason for that other than he guessed he would feel embarrassed if everyone knew and he failed to finish for some reason.

Billy drove the truck to the barn and unloaded, hoping Duke had called Addie with good news. Then he worried that no one had called Redigo's wife at all. He sure didn't want to have to be the one to break the news about Skylar to the ranch's long-time housekeeper.

Billy walked out of the barn as Addie came down the path. She looked concerned but not hysterical.

"Redigo called a few minutes ago. Skye's in X-ray. They think she broke her arm, but she seems to be okay otherwise."

"That's good. I'll get busy with the chores...unless you need me for something."

The older woman patted him on the arm. "No, but thanks. I'll let you know when I hear anything more."

With a nod, Billy moved on to the job in front of him. His feet dragged like somebody had filled them

with cement. The afternoon stretched long in front of him.



"Billy, where's that saddle? I want to have a close look at that cinch."

Billy flinched. Redigo's loud voice caused the horses in the stalls to whinny and snicker in protest, and they were down on the other end of the barn. Redigo and Duke had just arrived back at the ranch with Skylar after several hours in the emergency room. Billy swallowed hard as he went to retrieve the saddle.

Billy stood with his hands clinched as he watched Redigo examine the cinch. He felt like he stood in front of a tornado heading right for him. The future didn't look too bright.

Redigo's voice was lower this time as he spoke.
"So how do you think this happened?"

"I don't know. It was fine when I put it on the horse. You know I don't shirk my duties."

Redigo's cold stare sent chills up Billy's spine.

"What's goin' on here?" Skylar's soft, feminine voice sounded weak.

Billy turned enough to look at his boss. Her pale face reflected her exhaustion. She leaned against Duke as if she could hardly stand on her own.

Redigo answered for him. "We were discussing how the cinch broke."

"Billy's not to blame. I checked it myself after Billy saddled Skylark's Son. I never noticed any flaws," Skylar said.

Redigo stared at the saddle. "Then how did this happen?"

"I don't know, but Billy didn't mess up. Now, can we let this go? Accidents happen and I'm tired. I'd like to go to bed, and I can't do that if you two are down here arguing."

Billy watched Redigo's look soften. "Fine. For now. But I am going to figure out how this happened." Redigo pointed toward the main house. "Duke, I think you should be gettin' our girl to bed before she falls asleep on her feet."

Redigo turned back to look at Billy. "Billy, you need to be finishin' the rest of your chores before dark."



"I'm glad you called me. I can't be sure, but it does look like this might have been cut at least part-way through," Dan Tate said.

"That's what I thought." Redigo looked at Billy, who stood quietly just inside his office. "After I got over being so angry at a certain young ranch hand, I sat down and examined the cinch very carefully." Redigo ran his fingers through his dark black hair. "I hate to think someone would cut it but you know these competitions are serious business and lots of money changes hands. I guess someone could have wanted to make sure Skylar didn't bring another trophy back to the Lazy M."

Billy and Redigo watched as the deputy examined the cinch once again. The sound of booted footsteps caught Billy's attention.

Redigo looked up as Duke walked into the office. Duke nodded toward Dan then turned his attention to Redigo.

"Duke, look at the cinch again. Does it look like it was worn and just broke to you?"

Duke took the cinch and examined it. "Who would have done this and when? Billy, or Skye, would have seen it when they checked the saddle."

Billy nodded as Duke glanced at him. Redigo ran his thumb back and forth along the ring attached to the top end of the cinch. He paused and looked at his thumb. A shallow cut stretched across the width of his thumb. His eyes narrowed as he watched blood ooze to the surface.

"Redigo, what happened?" Billy asked.

"There's a rough spot on this ring."

Dan took the ring away and looked at it carefully. Focusing on the rough spot, he asked, "Could this have cut through the fiber slowly enough to make it weak? Then, when Skylar was in the middle of her jumps, it broke through?"

Redigo tugged at his ear. "It's possible, I guess." He rubbed the back of his neck. "But I just don't see how all of us could have missed it."

Dan handed the cinch ring back to Redigo. "It looks like it cut through where the cinch folded around the ring. I'll bet it fit so tight you couldn't have spotted it before it broke."

Redigo tossed the metal circle into a box on his shelf. "You're probably right. I guess I should let it go."

"You got anything else for me to do, Redigo?" Billy asked.

"Not if you're done with the list I gave you this mornin', why?"

"I...umm...need to drive into town. I have something to do this evening."

Redigo snorted. "You gotta girl in Denton? You've

been runnin' off to town a lot."

Billy clamped his jaws closed. There was only the rest of this semester to go. Why not go ahead and tell them? Redigo saved him the decision.

"Get outta here; you're done for the day." Redigo's stomach gave a loud rumble.

Billy snickered and tried to hide the grin that popped out.

"Think I'll go see what my wife's been cookin' up for supper. Smells like fried chicken and hot cornbread. Thanks for droppin' by, Dan. Sorry I wasted your time."

Even as Redigo strode away, something niggled at Billy. The explanation for the broken cinch still didn't satisfy him. The muscles in his shoulders tightened up. He stretched his arms, but it didn't relieve the tension. He looked at his watch. Time to go if he didn't want to be late for class. If Dan was satisfied with the explanation, Billy figured he knew best.

Billy climbed into his truck and drove off, dust flying behind him.

Chapter Two

Hacienda Tejada outside of Chihuahua, Mexico

Rosita waited as her cousin, Doug Conners, spoke on his cell. Something was wrong; she could tell from his side of the conversation.

"Is she going to be okay?"

Apparently, someone had been hurt. Rosita wished Doug would tell her who the call was from and what had happened. She paced.

Doug ended the call and looked at her.

"Who?"

"Skylar."

Relief relaxed her muscles. Then she felt guilty. Skylar Carlisle had befriended her last year, at a time when Rosita had needed someone. Her mother's death had left a hole in her heart. Finding out John Redigo was her natural father, just days before her mother's death, had only further added to her confusion. Then when Redigo had married Addie and moved to their home on the small ranch adjacent to the Lazy M, Skylar had asked Rosita to come spend some time at the ranch to be near her father.

Now something had happened to Skylar.

"What happened? Is she going to be all right?" Rosita clutched at the oval-shaped gold locket hanging around her neck. It contained a picture of Redigo and her mother, taken when they had been married.

Doug hugged her. "She'll be fine. The cinch broke on her saddle during the Fort Worth show and she fell from her horse, breaking her arm. Didn't even require surgery...just an old-fashioned cast."

Rosita sighed. "I'm glad." She tapped her mouth with an index finger. "Maybe I should fly to Dallas and then drive to the Lazy M. She might need help."

"With Duke, Redigo and Addie there? You think she needs someone else?" Doug laughed.

"She might." Rosita tilted her head upward and looked down her nose at her mother's favorite cousin.

Doug rolled his eyes. "When you look at me like that, you look just like Marianna."

The reference to her mother made Rosita laugh. "Then you must have irritated my mother as easily as you do me."

"I'd guess so." Doug chuckled under the chin. "I'd say you were looking for an excuse to go back to Texas and see your father." Doug paused. "You don't need an excuse, you know. Redigo and Addie would welcome you any time you want to show up."

Rosita cast her glance at the floor. "I know...it's just...they've only been married a short time. I don't want to bother them."

"I don't think either of them considers you a bother. Go pack your things."

"But the hacienda..."

Doug laughed. "We've hired all the old staff back. Your ranch will be well managed for as long as you want to be gone. Esteban is a good foreman who will contact you if there's something he can't handle."

Rosita's dark brown eyes sparkled as she smiled and her heart lightened. "You are correct. I can work on my designs while I'm in Denton."

"Good plan. I'll call the airport while you pack."

Rosita rushed up the stairs to her suite. "Maria, please come help me pack. I'm going to Texas."



Rosita grimaced as she checked her reflection in the rental car's visor mirror. Her nose needed attention. She removed her compact from her purse and added a light layer of pressed powder to take away the shine. She removed the clip holding her shoulder-length black hair away from her face, shook her head and then fluffed through her wavy tresses with her fingers.

Pushing the car door open, Rosita stepped onto the gravel-covered drive next to the Lazy M's main house. She stretched her arms toward the sky and worked the kinks out of her back and legs. Addie would be in the house working, and who knew where her father would be at this time of the day. Skylar should be taking it easy inside. Rosita smiled at the thought of surprising them.

She was halfway to the porch when the spiked heel of her shoe caught, causing her to tumble to the ground. Before she could recover her breath, a pair of large, muscular hands pulled her to her feet.

"Are you okay, Miss Hernandez?"

Rosita looked into a pair of icy blue eyes. Concern flickered through them as they stared at her. She took a step back.

"I'm f... fine. Thank you for your assistance."

The ranch hand...was his name Will? Rosita couldn't remember. He tipped his cap then bent down and picked up her purse. He wiped the dust from the