

An excerpt from

Lasso My Heart

by Meg Write

Chapter 1 Rodeo

For all the people in Lone Pine, the yearly rodeo brought much needed activity to the otherwise forsaken town. The McCruther family hosted the rodeo with monetary prizes. The town consisted of one hotel and restaurant, one saloon and a jail. Across the main street were one small general goods store, the small grain and feed store and the livery at the end of the town completed the small town. There was a church building a couple of miles out of town but it wasn't near enough to be considered part of Lone Pine town. Behind the livery were the large corrals that held much of the action during the week the rodeo was held.

Before the rodeo, Mr. Perkins, who owned the general store, would be seen sweeping the dust out of his store. The small feed and grain store was opened only on Saturday because that was the only time it did any business. And the sheriff could usually be found in the saloon playing a game of checkers with Sam the barkeep. It was a small dusty town. The signs creaked when the wind unmercifully blew through the almost ghost town. The rodeo is what kept this town alive.

When the cowboys rode into town and everything changed. Banners and streamers covered the street and places of business. Ranchers and their families would pour into town for a week of fun and excitement away from the monotonous hard life on the range. Mr. Perkins would do a

whole month business in one day. The hotel and livery stable filled up fast with most of the cowboys sleeping in the latter. Local boys came into town hoping to earn some of the big money prizes. Whooping and hollering was heard well into the night and the sheriff did more business than Sam the barkeep. Country girls dressed up in their finest; glad to be rid of the homely gingham that was the everyday staple. Every night during the rodeo a dance was held in the center of town where cowboys who rode all day, danced all night and often played cards into the wee hours of the morning. Yes, it was an exciting time for Lone Pine, why one of these days they might even get on the map.

Sam was wiping out one of the glasses on the bar, while the sheriff watched him.

“Whut are you doing that?” the sheriff inquired. “The rodeo don’t start ‘til next week.” The sheriff was a short burly man, whose hard life had left its toil on him. His hair was the color of the snow that was never seen around these parts, and his face was full of wrinkles that showed his long years in the sun.

“I know, but it doesn’t hurt to be ready,” Sam responded. A tall thin man, Sam wasn’t young or handsome looking, but he wore his years well, never being required to labor for his living as the sheriff had done.

The sheriff laughed. “You done been ready since them boys left town last year. I for one have been dreading the upcomin’ week.”

Sam shook his head. "It's about the only business I get. It's just enough to last me through the year." Sighing, he put down his rag, "Why don't I pack up and leave for a more prosperous town?"

"Cause this little wind-blown town has its hold on you. Jest like it's got on me. The onlest way we'll get out of this town is to die. Then they'll be nobody left to carry our bodies out to boot hill. We'll jest rot like everything else in this town."

"Why are you complaining? You never have to do anything near a job. No hard work, you just sit there and fiddle with the checkerboard all day long."

"Yep, but not next week," the sheriff grunted pushing checkers around with his fingers. "Them cowpokes seem to think they can shoot up my town iffing they got a mind to."

"Oh so now it's your town. I thought you were tired of this dusty excuse for a town."

"I am, but I kin still do my job protectin' the citizens, can't I?" Their conversation stopped for the time being, both men growing as quiet as the town outside the saloon door. Only the wind made any noise, but that was only when it brushed against a solid object. "You're right 'bout that, Sam," the sheriff continued. "This town has us both. We're as old as the wind that's blowin' through the street there." A faraway look came to the old man's eyes as he continued, "I remember the first time I done set foot on that street. I was with my father and he had just been made sheriff. How proudly he wore that badge. The sun gleamed on it, and it nearly made my eyes smart." His countenance changed. "And them cowboys rode in trying to take over the town; he attempted to hold them off with his gun. One man against ten ruthless outlaws. No townsfolk would help him. He never had a chance." The sheriff glanced down. "I picked up the badge that lay on the ground with him. I promised to keep this here town safe for him."

“And you have.”

“But whar it enough? Was this all I could ever have done? Was I supposed to do more?” Again the two men were lost in thought. One thinking about his father, and the other thinking about the father he never had.

“Are you going to just stand there or are we going to play checkers?” Sam asked, coming out of his reverie, “It’ll be the last time before the cowboys ride in.”

Across town, Mr. Perkins and his wife were enjoying the calm before the storm. The selling storm that was. Sitting on their porch, Mr. Perkins, a tall thin man of 38 years was busy setting his accounts in order before the next week. Rocking in a chair next to her husband, Mrs. Perkins, a short well built woman of 35 with brunette hair and brown eyes was mending one of her husband’s socks, though not totally concentrating on it. Instead Mrs. Perkins was counting on enough profit off the rodeo to finance a trip back east to see her parents.

“Do you really think we’ll earn enough to travel back east?” she concernedly asked her husband.

“No, we never do,” he bluntly replied.

Suddenly fed up with the life she was leading, she threw down the sock and rose to her full height. “I’m sick of this town, the dust and the lack of people. I want to see my friends and family I left behind when you brought me out here. I do not ever want to come back.”

“But that would mean leaving behind everything we own. And what about our only child?”

“We don’t have anything here that can’t be replaced. And besides, Susan is almost grown and should see some of the finer things in life. I won’t have her marrying a simple cowboy who’s no good.”

He set aside his work and stood up, “You know we’ve tried to leave before. The town needs us though, and Susan will make a good choice you can count on that. You have friends. What about Mrs. McCruther? And Susan likes Mercy they are good friends, we have friends here.”

“Maryann is dwindling away from the sadness this wilderness brought her, taking away her first four children. And Mercy isn’t much of a friend to Susan. Mercy would rather be out on the range, riding some horse instead of focusing on things a young woman should.”

“We’ll see about visiting home this year,” her exasperated husband consoled.

“Thank you. I’m sorry about getting so upset, but I just am tired of this life,” his wife apologized.

This scene happened every year. His wife would become fed up with their small life and want to go home, but after the rodeo she always seemed to be content for another year. He hoped she would be content again for another year. Personally, he loved the land and his way of life, and he had a suspicion Susan already had her eye on a young cowboy in the area. When he first married, he brought his wife out west though she was used to the finer things in life. He had hoped she would settle down and enjoy their life. Although they had it quite easy compared to the ranchers; living in town, they were protected. They had a well that never dried up, and the supplies that came to their store were never delayed. Never did they run short of money and they

didn't have to worry about livestock or their money crop. But still she had never settled down, always maintaining the hope they would move back to the east.

"It's alright," he comforted her, "I understand. I'll try my best."

Chapter 2 The Dance

Mr. McCruther stood and looked from the window of his house. This land, all of it, was his. He sighed as saw his only child, Mercy a beautiful girl of 18 wandering back from the hills she loved. Thinking back on the years, he recollected how he had come from Indiana, tired of growing up in the dirt, living off of it from sunup to sundown.

His Great-Grandfather came from Scotland as the Revolutionary War was starting; first being an indentured servant, then fighting for his new country. McCruther's Grandfather followed the wilderness trail blazed by Daniel Boone and settled in Indiana, keeping his family safe from Indians. Now McCruther continued the family tradition and moved to Texas soon after the Texas revolution. He had started as a cowhand on a good ranch and with the money he earned and saved; he started small and bought a 4,000-acre ranch and a few cattle. Ten years later he had a good-sized ranch and married his sweetheart from Indiana.

Only a Scotsman could have done as much in as short a time. Although America had long since erased a Scottish burr from the family, the ingenuity and knowledge of a dollar helped mold the empire that the Circle Start Ranch was known as. The years had touched his red hair leaving in it silver threads. He walked with a cane, a result of an attempt to break a stallion to ride. His eyes showed the many years he had lived; however his face was that of a much younger man.

His gaze strayed to the small cemetery under a lone cottonwood tree. His and Maryann's first four children lay there in undisturbed slumber. How the deaths of these children aged his Maryann, how fragile she now seemed. Her slight figure and snow-white head would be seen bowing over the small headstones, now smoothed with age and weather. How she doted on her living child Mercy. Keeping her from both sides of life, she protected her from everything. A

sighed escaped him and he turned from the window. How he wished he could give Mercy more than just the ranch when he passed on.

Maryann was a small fragile being, and the deaths of her children had taken a toll on her. Her hair had become white before she turned 30, and she barely associated with anyone outside her family. Instead she kept to a rigid pattern everyday. She would rise at 6:00 in the morning and help the cook prepare a breakfast for her family, then return to bed. Later in the day she would rise again to help with lunch, and make her daily trip to the graveyard. Not only were her children buried here, but a part of her life as well.

She ran her fingers across the names etched on the stones that marked each small grave. Peter McCruther born August 15, 18-- , died December 8 18--.

She sighed as she thought of the little boy that had been taken away from her too soon. He had been full of life and was taking after his father in looks. Stephen had been so proud of his son, and Maryann had been proud to bear his first born son. But the fever had taken their five year-old son away, and left a hole in his wake.

Her next two children had died before their first birthdays. John Lee was born on April 7, 18-- and died in May, after less than a month on this earth. Annabelle, was born on January 9, 18-- and died in the spring. Maryann's next baby boy was stillborn on December 27, 18--.

Maryann almost died during that childbirth also, and now she wished she had. Although she had been blessed with another baby, she was tired of living, and tired of hurting her family with her own pain. She did not they felt hurt by the lack of attention she gave to their lives, but she

couldn't be constantly reminded. She didn't want to hurt her family anymore. Worry filled their eyes, she could tell that they cared about her and she wanted to release the guilt they had. "If only I could just die," she thought.

Mercy was sitting on the porch steps very trim and beautiful in the sky blue cotton dress that brought out her bright blue eyes and accented her long and flowing hair. Hair the color of sunbeams as her father often said. She often sat here this time of day when the sun just began to touch the horizon and cast a gold tone over all the land. She sighed and leaned up against the railing soaking in the sunlight.

As the sun sank lower from the sky, Mercy glanced at the house careful to avert her eyes from the sun and watched, as the house windows seemed to catch fire. Again she looked across the land. It truly was a sight to behold. Every time she it was as if she had seen it for the first time. "Oh," she sighed and closed her eyes.

"Well if it isn't Lady of the Circle Star," a voice called to her. She opened her eyes and glared at the cowboy who had dared to try to speak to her. "You're more predictable than..."

"Dick," she interpreted, "You are always sticking your nose into other people's affairs." The cowboy was Dick McLane son of the foreman of the Circle Star ranch, Bob McLane. Bob McLane had come west with Mr. McCruther and together they built the Circle Star ranch. Dick was a handsome boy in appearance. His mother had died in childbirth and his father continued to spoil him. Never did Dick take the consequences for his actions; his father always excused the boy because he didn't have a female influence in his life. The same age as Mercy, Dick was

heavily built though quite tall for his build, just the type to run a ranch. His flashing dark eyes meant a lot of trouble, and his blonde hair was often unkempt.

“I came to ask you to the dance tonight,” He continued.

“Dick, I told you long ago, that everything has changed since we grew up together as kids,” Mercy stormed. Although her hair was blonde, and a fiery temper is associated with redheads, Mercy could hold her own in an argument. She never lost her temper around animals, but with people she was often bothered by little things they did that disturbed her. And most of all, Dick disturbed her. Chalk it up to women’s intuition, but behind that most handsome face, Mercy felt there was a deep feeling of anger.

“You mean you’ve changed,” he provoked her. Dick knew her since they were kids. They had grown up together, and at first been good friends. But then he changed, and Mercy could feel it. But still he could provoke her anger; he knew how to make her mad.

“No, it means that you have changed,” she retorted as she rose to her feet, “All you think about is this ranch. Well if I have anything to do with it you’ll never get it.” She turned on her heel and stormed into the house.

“I still like it when she gets mad.” Dick laughed.

“I won’t let her. She’s too young, Stephen,” Maryann McCruther argued to her husband in the shelter of their room later that evening.

“She is growing up a sheltered life. How will she be able to take over the ranch?” Stephen McCruther argued back, “I just decided that I am going to take her to the dance tonight. She needs to get away from the ranch. Right now it is all she knows.”

Mr. McCruther pulled the horse to a stop in front of the town square. A man came to hold the horse while Mr. McCruther helped Mercy down from the buggy. “I want you to have a good time.” He encouraged her.

“You know I always do,” she cheerfully replied. As they entered the crowded square, everyone turned to look at Mercy on her father’s arm. Stunning in her pink silk gown, she immediately caught the gaze of every cowboy in the town square. She wore her hair down like she always did. Many of the cowboys abandoned their female partners to clamor for a dance.

“Easy boys,” her father reassured them, “She’ll dance with all of you.” A cheer arose from the crowd. Mercy allowed herself to be taken by the cowboy nearest her for the first dance. She was twirled and swirled dance after dance until Dick arrived and claimed his dance. Halting midway through the dance, he began to lead her away from the town square. Mercy felt her heart sink as he led her behind a store.

Reaching for her, Dick tried to pull her closer. Mercy pushed at him trying to free herself, but Dick held her pressing closer trying to kiss her. Pulling one of her hands free of his grip, she slapped him with her hand. The blow was so hard it stunned Dick and he pushed her to the ground. Dick looked confused for a moment, but only a moment. Composing himself, he looked at her again.

Mercy warned him, "I can still outrun you Dick, just like when we were kids." Dick did not heed these words and lunged at her as she scrambled to flee. Catching her arm, he held it tight though she strained to get away. He pressed her against the wall of the store. Suddenly Dick's eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed to the ground releasing Mercy's arm. Surprised, she looked up and saw a cowboy with his gun drawn.

He smiled at her and replaced the gun in his holster. He did not mention the action but instead asked if he could have the next dance as he extended his arm. Still shaking Mercy took the arm extended to her and allowed herself to be led back to the dance. Inside the town square the cowboy politely introduced himself as Mark Reid. Mark was here for the rodeo. After Mercy had politely introduced herself they both fell silent.

Because of the struggle, Mercy felt strangely weak and leaned heavily on Mark for the dance, yet she noticed he did not hold her as tightly as some of the other cowboys had. She also noticed the ease of dancing with Mark and how light she felt in his arms. Never before had she felt this way and deep inside her, she never wanted the dance to end.

However, the music finished and as the couples clapped their admiration for the small band, Mercy asked Mark if he would find her father.

"I quite worn out," she explained. Accomplishing the task, Mark came back and escorted Mercy to the edge of the party. "I suppose you think me a weak woman," Mercy began as they waited for her father to bring the buggy around. Before Mark could respond, Mercy continued, "I could have screamed, and I didn't. I could have run, but I hesitated." She looked in his eyes. "I've known Dick all my life. His father and my father came out west together. It has always been assumed that I would marry Dick. But I won't now and I never will. He's not the man for me. I saw that tonight. And I wanted to thank you." She turned away.

Mark wanted to ask why she confided in him, but he was not one to pry. He saw the worry in her eyes and thought of the trouble in his own life. At that time the buggy came into view. Mr. McCruther stopped the buggy with a whoa to his horse. Mark helped Mercy into the buggy as

Mr. McCruther asked him a question, "Are you going to ride tomorrow, son?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm here to ride the bronc's." Mark softly replied his gaze upon Mercy.

"Will you be in town long? I try and sign up most of the trail hands to work on my cattle drive later in the month. We sure could use you," Mr. McCruther continued.

"Maybe, I'll see about it."

"I wish you the best of success in tomorrows contest Mr. Reid," Mercy spoke. With that Mr. McCruther spoke to his horse and the buggy rambled off towards the ranch. Mark stood there and watched it disappear in the night.

Chapter 3 Reflections

Mark stood there as if captivated by the mere sight of that simple buggy. His mind went back to when he had first seen Mercy step into the square. Her beauty had taken his breath away. For a long time, he simply stood outside the town's square, watching her dance with the other cowboys. She had a beautiful grace about her, and he seemed drawn to her. He studied her as she danced; looking at her lovely face, her deep blue eyes, and the way the color of her pink silk dress had complemented her fair complexion.

He wanted to dance with her, but he didn't try. He was scared of her, as silly as it seemed, he was afraid of hurting himself again. So he only watched her from the side, wanting to know more about her, but why? Why did she cause him to feel something towards her? She seemed so far above him, so unobtainable, so distant.

As he stood near the refreshment table, he over heard a few women talking about the girl.

"Well, I never thought Mercy would show tonight,"

"I know what you mean. Her mother is so protective of her, but it is to be expected, seeing how they lost four children before her."

"It must be hard being an only child,"

"I don't think it is hard on Mercy. She is such a dear. She helped little Linda with her reading, and I think she would be a teacher if her mother would let her."

"Isn't she stunning?"

“Do you know she made that dress?”

“Well, I believe it. She is so talented. She even plays the piano.”

“I just can’t believe she is the same girl that rides a horse bareback.”

“I know it just doesn’t seem ladylike. And I’ve seen her run around barefoot.” At this Mark chuckled, he didn’t know where or not to believe it.

The women continued to talk, but Mark drifted away. Everything they said continued to prove his thinking. He, a simple drifting cowboy, would never have a chance with such a girl.

And then he saw his chance. A drunk cowboy had made his way towards her, but she had accepted his offer of a dance, albeit hesitantly. This worried Mark, why even he did not know. His fears were well founded, however, as the cowboy dragged the girl away from the crowd. Why did she go with him? No one else noticed. He followed, seeing fear in her eyes. Why didn’t she scream? The whole town would have been hers to command.

He heard the man mumble and throw her to the ground.

“Run,” he urged silently.

But she didn’t move, she only warned the cowboy to leave her alone. Calling him by name as if she knew him, she waited.

“That would explain it,” Mark thought to himself.

The cowboy grabbed her again and thrust her against the back of a near by store. Quickly Mark stepped in, pulling his gun and bringing it down hard on the drunken cowboy's head. The cowboy fell to the ground, dazed, and the girl looked up at him. Unsure of what to do next, he asked for a dance. She nodded agreement and took the arm offered her.

“What were you thinking?” Mark asked himself. “Well it worked didn't it,” he answered his own question. As he grasped her hand to dance, he felt her smooth lily white hands. Nervously he grasped her waist, sending a shiver up his spine. She placed her hand on his shoulder, and it grew warm under her touch. She laid her head on his shoulder, tired from the struggle. Mark didn't know what to do. Half of him wanted to run away, and the other half wanted to hold her tight, and protect her. So he compromised, and danced out into the square, never wanting the dance to end.

Of course it did, though, and she left, but not before she explained to him.

Normally, Mark would not be found anywhere near people. It wasn't safe for him to be. But something had changed his mind, and he was glad of that.

As he watched the road she had disappeared on, the moon was hidden behind a cloud and another vision came to him. “No,” he said to himself, “I will not let that hurt me tonight.” He closed his eyes to shut it out, but still it came and haunted him. Men on horses, thunderous hooves, his mother crying, this came back to him.

He shook his head and glanced up at the moon again. It came out from under the cloud and shone even brighter. It gave him hope, because it shown over the very house in which a certain girl was sleeping.

After the dance had ended, and the people began to drift homeward, Dick awoke and was aware of a splitting headache.

“Ouch,” he yelled as he touched his head. He looked at his hand and saw blood. “What?” he asked himself looking around. A large building was there, but he couldn’t remember what had happened.

He stumbled into the saloon and leaned on the bar.

“You look terrible,” Sam the barkeep said to him.

“I feel terrible, just give me a bottle,” he slapped the money on the counter and took the bottle to the nearest table. He pulled off his bandana and soaked it with the alcohol. He grimaced when he dabbed it on his cut. “Wouldn’t be good if it got infected before the drive,” he thought as he put some of the whiskey inside of him too. A man came over and sat next to him.

“Ah, go away and leave me alone, John,” Dick yelled at him.

“I don’t think you’re going to get Mercy,” the cowboy informed him, ignoring Dick’s request, “I just saw her dancing with that drifter.”

“So,” he glared at the other man, “I’ve still got her father’s approval. She’ll have to marry me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he stood up to leave.

Dick motioned for him to stay, “Alright, we’ll do it your way.” He stared at him, “Make sure you get enough.” He took another swig of the whiskey, and got up to leave.

“Where are you going?” the cowboy asked him.

Dick smiled, “Well, if I can’t get the most eligible gal in the county, I try for the second. See you later.” Taking the bottle with him, he swung through the doors on the saloon, and stumbled to the hitching post. Under the silver moon his horse waited, and stood patiently while Dick climbed into the saddle and spurred him away from town and away from the Circle Star ranch.

Back at the Circle Star ranch, Mercy’s heart had finally calmed down. She hadn’t been unsettled by Dick. No, it was Mark that had caused her heart to flutter. She sighed and crawled out of her bed and sat in the window of her room. The moon was full and cast a silver blanket on the land. Her land. That’s how she always thought of the land. True, her father held the deed to the land, and her mother hated it, but she was one with it. She knew every hill, tree and brook on the land. Except in rare cases, Mercy wasn’t ever allowed around anyone else, her mother kept her from the world to keep her safe, but she didn’t keep her from the land. Mercy had always been surprised her mother didn’t complain about her wanderings.

She closed her eyes. It seemed as if her whole life had she had been wandering. Looking for something special, or maybe someone special, she still wandered. Her mother loved her, but she was so deep in grief that she never enjoyed her daughter. She always worried about her, and Mercy knew that was love, but she couldn’t get close because she was always afraid of losing her.

The wind blew in through the open window and moved her lacy curtains. Feeling the wind with her hand, Mercy smiled and thought about her father. He loved her too, but he was always busy with the ranch, even though it was thriving.

Until tonight, Mercy didn't know how much she needed someone to love her unconditionally. Until someone had held her in his arms, she didn't know how her whole being ached for and needed another. All her life she had been a loner, and now she needed someone. The silver blanket on the ground dimmed as a cloud passed over the moon. Mercy looked up and wondered if a very special person was looking at the same moon right now.