

Gypsy Gulch  
*A Moon Dancing Mystery*

© 2013 by Anna Zogg

Published by Next Step Books, P.O. Box 70271, West Valley City, Utah 84170

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise – without written permission of the author or publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews. [www.nextstepbooks.org](http://www.nextstepbooks.org)

Cover art by Rachel Dinda

## **Contents**

[Start Reading](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Read an Excerpt from \*Moon Dancing\*](#)

The body lay at the bottom of a ravine. A long trail of blood led down the rocky incline which appeared impossible to climb. Was that what the killer intended? His work had been done in secret, in a remote location, when evil could progress unhindered. Undetected. When the sick joy of inflicting pain and destroying life belonged to him alone.

Today, however, Samantha Farrell would expose his reign of terror. *It's time.*

Tipping back her hat, she stared downward. This was the fourth animal's corpse she'd run across in the last couple months. Now, she knew what to look for. Knew how the killer operated.

A hunch had urged her to pull over when she saw the shine of something alongside the road. Reflecting the rays of a dipping sun, a silver coin stood half buried in the dirt. Then she noticed torn red flannel on the barbed wire. Unfaded by the summer sun, the slip of material fluttered in the breeze. Recently left? Like a marker? Though her stomach grumbled with hunger, she had pushed her way through the fencing and trekked toward the craggy hills. Each step only confirmed her misgivings. She dreaded what she would find.

Death. Obviously very recent because the buzzards had not yet discovered the body. From her position, she listened to the drone of busy flies below. The sound amplified and bounced off rocky walls. The afternoon heat had baked the blood into a black smudge where the body had been thrown. Nearby were other signs of wicked machinations: a stake with a short rope, scattered feathers, chunks of fur. More blood. Metallic odor stung her nostrils.

Sam put a lid on new worries that bubbled up in her mind. Clenching her phone, she fought with herself about making the call. *I can't keep this to myself. Not any longer.* After scrolling through her contacts for the number, she pressed the cell to her ear.

"Hello?" said a deep voice.

"Chad? It's Sam." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Remember about a month or so ago? I told you I discovered something?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Found another. Can we meet in an hour?" Glancing at the vast Wyoming sky, she noted the disappearing daylight. She didn't want to be out after dark. Not here. She wouldn't chance hurting herself as she traveled back to the road.

Or being around should the killer return.

"Sure." The reception crackled. He said something more, words unintelligible.

She moved a couple paces. "What was that?"

His voice blinked back. "I asked where you wanted to meet."

"Your house? I'll fill ya in then."

"You got it."

That was the great thing about the sheriff. He didn't question or haggle. Least not with her, anyways.

After Sam hung up, she leaned forward to again peer into the ravine. Even in the poor light, she could see the mutilated body. Was there another? That one looked way old. She held her phone over the gaping depths and snapped some photos. Not that she needed proof. Chad would believe her.

A shiver snaked down her spine. Couldn't be the blood. No, she'd seen her share. Then was someone nearby? Watching?

Turning on a boot heel, she glanced around. The barren landscape could hide little. Normally. Nearby, huge boulders rose along the horizon. Multiplying and pooling, massive shadows crept between the rocks. The wind swept through the spaces and moaned.

The azure sky faded into twilight. Shimmering weakly into view, stars announced the approach of night. Regardless of the promise of a full moon, darkness seemed to cling to her, wrapping around her mind.

*I need to get outa here.*

What if *he* returned? From the evidence and the obvious marker, this place could be a favorite.

He might no longer be content with only animals.

Sam considered herself a levelheaded woman. With forty-two years of living on God's green earth, she should be. But superstition made her flesh crawl when she swore she heard her whispered name. Breath coming hard, she continued to turn, looking. *For what?*

Hooves pounded in the distance, yet didn't grow louder as it would if a herd of horses drew nearer. A muted thunder circled her, echoing in the twilight. The rim of a brilliant moon burst over the ridge.

The eerie sound suddenly stopped.

Then she saw it. Saw *him*.

Gulping, she stared at the lone figure on the rocky horizon. Bare-chested, he stood with feet spread, dark hair hanging past his shoulders. Indian? He had not been there moments before. Silhouetted against the rising orb, the stranger looked in her direction. She felt his gaze. Felt it to the core of her being.

Sam didn't hesitate. She turned and ran.

\* \* \*

"A few months back, I found a body here. Mighta been a dog." She pointed. "Was pretty far gone. And last month..." Trying to find the exact spot, Sam bent over the map spread across the square kitchen table. Light from a lone bulb, directly above, beat down on the paper.

As Chad leaned forward, the wooden chair creaked in protest. Sounded about to break, he was so massive. Not fat. Just big.

She finally found the location. "Two sheep. Couple miles from each other."

Though he sat while she stood, his level gaze met hers. Illumination glinted off the star-shaped badge on his shirt and highlighted his salt-and-pepper hair. "What about this evening?"

"Here. One, possibly two." Her finger shook when she indicated the place. She willed it to cease, but couldn't stop the tremor from bounding up her arm and through her body.

Stupid nerves. What was it about the man on the ridge that so perturbed her? He'd not appeared armed or been close enough to harm her. Yet she'd run like a scared rabbit.

Then she realized she pointed to the wrong spot. "No, I mean there." Her voice squeaked. "Not far from Gypsy Gulch."

The huge man said nothing for a moment, staring intently at where her slim fingertip rested. When Sam noticed she visibly trembled, she clasped her hands behind her. He was silent so long that she grew uncomfortable. Didn't he want details? Or arrange a time when she could show him the locations? Preferably during the day.

"You touch anything? Move anything?"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head. "Left everything as is."

He contemplated her for a moment. "Why haven't you told me about this before now?"

"No idea."

*Liar.*

She rubbed her forearm. "The remains of one I saw...well, I couldn't be a hundred percent sure. Others had been torn by wild animals. Guess I didn't want to believe..." No, she didn't

want to believe several things. That the animals had been mutilated. That the suspects were limited.

Her stomach knotted.

Without a word, Chad got up, poured some coffee, and then handed her the cup. Though she'd refused earlier, she now took it. Again, he sat. Knees unsteady, she slid into the chair opposite him. Her shaking hand threatened to spill the mug's contents.

His light brown eyes fixed on her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Sam strove to regain her composure. What was wrong with her? She was a licensed veterinarian. Not some greenhorn from the big city who knew nothing about country life.

Was it the mutilations? Or the criminal behind them?

"Never seen you this shook up before."

*Distract. Disseminate.* If she didn't, the sheriff would dig deeper. And what he'd discover she didn't want him to know. Ever since her move to Silver Springs, she'd worked hard to keep her distance from the one man from whom she had to keep secrets.

She managed to fix a tremulous smile in place. "Well, you don't know everything."

"But I know *you*." His quiet voice made Sam catch her breath.

She shifted in her seat. Why the change in his tone? And why those words?

Had to be nothing. He was just stating the obvious. Around these parts, no one he didn't know. After nearly forty years in the area, he should.

According to the town gossips, he'd been raised in the area by foster parents when he'd been abandoned, a neglected and skinny seven year old. Now, at six foot three and well over two hundred pounds, he'd obviously overcome that youthful disadvantage. And other ones as well.

But why he'd chosen law enforcement was a mystery. Chad just didn't seem the type. Ever since her move to Wyoming five years ago, she'd always thought of him as a giant teddy bear.

Compared to him, she was a midget. Probably half his weight, soaking wet.

"What are you not telling me?" He watched her steadily.

Sam ducked her head to study the coffee. He hadn't offered cream or sugar. Of course, he would know she took neither. He didn't miss much.

She cast about for an explanation. Any that would work. "I—I saw someone. A man on the ridge. After I called you. There was something..." She broke off, unable to explain why everything about Gypsy Gulch so unsettled her. Unease, caused by more than the stranger on the ridge, nipped at her mind.

"He was someone you'd never seen before." Chad didn't ask.

She got up and strolled away from the pooling light and his scrutiny. Her gaze landed on framed photos on the dim kitchen wall. An older couple, perhaps his foster parents. A young and pretty woman. His deceased wife? The picture looked like it'd been taken years ago. Before cancer had ravaged her. Long before Sam's arrival in the area.

She suddenly realized this was the first time she'd been inside his house. First time she'd seen the pictures. Apparently he didn't like to weigh himself down with material possessions. The place was Spartan.

After taking a deep breath, she finally answered. "He wasn't from around here, if that's what you're implying."

"I wasn't. But if you say so, I believe ya."

She bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You tell me."

Somehow in the last few minutes, the teddy bear had transformed. The slight edge in his voice, his wrinkled forehead and piercing gaze betrayed the hardened law officer.

She clenched her teeth so hard they hurt. "Look, all I was doing was checking out some material on a fence. Just minding my own business. Then I ran across these mutilated animals. A guy magically pops up outa nowhere, giving me the creeps. I don't know anything beyond what I told you. You're the cop. You figure it out."

Turning away, she gulped her coffee and burned her mouth in the process. In the seconds that she decided not to spit the stuff all over the counter, liquid scalded its way down her throat.

The chair again creaked as the sheriff shifted his weight. After that, the silence went on and on until she thought she'd scream.

His voice finally cut through the dusky room. "Run into any other trouble?"

"What'd'ya mean?"

He indicated her jeans. "You have a two-inch tear. Looks recent."

"Just caught it on the barbed wire." *When I ran like a scared rabbit.* She wasn't going to admit that, though. Besides, he probably already guessed.

Chad glanced away, mouth tightening before he looked back at her. "I don't want you investigating any more mutilations. Hear me?"

"You...?" She set her coffee down with a *thunk*. "Seems to me, this here's a free country. Last time I checked. You're not the dictator."

"Don't get your knickers in a knot, I'm just trying to watch out for you."

"Ordering me around isn't watching out for me."

"It's for your own good, Samantha."

He was the only one who used her full name. But that didn't soften her up. She folded her arms.

*No man's gonna tell me what to do.*

Her ex used to bully her. She'd finally wised up and kicked him out. For fifteen years she had supported his no-good, lying, two-faced cheating. Not a woman back home he hadn't tried to hook up with. Problem was he conveniently forgot he was married. To her.

Chad sighed deeply. Noisily. "Got a gun? One you carry at all times?"

"No. But I own a rifle. I keep it in my truck. And take it horseback too."

"Hang on a sec." He rose and disappeared into the other room. After a moment, he returned and set the items on the table. "This is my personal property. It's a—"

"I know what it is." Irritation rippled through her tone as she stared down at the pistol and holster, spotlighted under the bulb. These used to be his wife's. She just knew it. "Thanks, but I'll be fine."

"This'll make certain." His voice hardened.

"I couldn't accept these."

"Lighten up. You're only borrowing them."

She looked up at him, jaw jutting. What sort of strings were attached to this gift? Even if it was temporary?

"Sam." The muscles in his neck tightened momentarily. "Weird stuff has been going on around here. Ever since Daniel O'Connor..." He pursed his lips, clearly debating about saying more.

He couldn't mean that ranch owner. No. Had to be something much more recent.

"You talking about Megan?" Not long ago, Megan Gillespie had arrived to spend time on her uncle's ranch. Sam considered her a friend. No, more than that. The fiery redhead had become a sort of daughter to her. "What does she—"

"I'm not saying she's involved in anything that's been happening. But the moment she set foot in our town, folks have been telling me about all sorts of unexplainable events. Yours are just more in a long list." He held up his hand. "You don't need to know details. But I'm not taking any chances. With anyone."

Especially you. He didn't need to say it. The words were written all over his face.

She pushed back the blond hair that fell into her eyes. "But I ran across the first animal before Megan got here."

"You said it was too far gone to be sure."

She rubbed her lower lip. "True."

"But the more recent ones. You positive they were mutilated?"

"Yeah." The stake and rope proved that.

He caressed the fine-tooled leather of the holster. "Please take these. I'd feel better."

She gulped at his softened tone. And the look on his face. For many moments, she appraised his unguarded expression, aware of something she'd not seen in the years she'd known him.

Then he straightened, the professional demeanor slipping back into place. Slowly. Casually. As though the something else had never been there.

"If you insist. Sheriff." She picked up the Glock and tested the weight. Not bad.

"And I'd appreciate you keeping all this to yourself. Including the mutilations."

"No problem a-t'all." She shuddered as she thought of their gruesome demise. No one else needed to know details.

"If you need me, Samantha, for any reason, text or call. Day or night." He touched the pistol in her hand. "And I pray to God you never have to use this."

\* \* \*

Blasted nightmare.

Sam sat up in bed, shivering. Images flickered on her dark bedroom walls, playing like negative film. Dead animals everywhere. A field full of them. Legs bent in unnatural angles. Heads thrown back. Lifeless eyes bulging.

Where were the happy dreams? The ones where she saved newborn puppies like she had a month ago? Her friend had been with her when she'd delivered nine healthy canines. The owners had smiled in relief. Megan had beamed. *I was a hero.*

Why couldn't she dream about that?

Since her meeting with Chad a few weeks before, she'd not hunted for more mutilation sites. Instead, she'd asked around town if anyone else had seen anything unusual when it came to animals. A couple people said they had. And Megan had mentioned unexplainable pranks on her uncle's ranch. So far, nothing substantial to present to the sheriff.

Staggering up from bed, she pressed her fingers to her forehead. Sam groped in a bathroom drawer. Aspirin. Where was the aspirin? Flipping on the light, she flinched from the brightness. Then screamed.

On the mirror was scrawled *Here kitty, kitty.* In blood.

\* \* \*

"No forced entry. Nobody saw anything. Or heard anything." The town's newest deputy droned off other details to Chad as they stood in her small living room. He ended with, "That isn't blood on the mirror. Only red marker. Might be permanent."



The sheriff glanced at Sam. "And you didn't see or hear anything?"

Headache still pounding, she managed a small shake without her brain hurting too much. "No."

"Anyone else have a key? You leave one outside somewhere?"

She shook her head to both questions as she hugged her worn gray sweatshirt more tightly. Before the two men had arrived, she'd yanked it and a pair of shorts on.

"Anything missing? Any drugs from your vet practice?"

She cleared the early morning frog from her throat. "Everything's double locked in the back of my truck. Nothing of value up here. Everyone knows that."

"And you were out late?"

"Yeah. Silver Tap." When his eyes narrowed, she added, "I wasn't drinking. Merely playing a game of checkers with Dorcas. You can ask her." Sam's voice rose a little.

Still he would know this wasn't her usual routine. He would know she'd been snooping around. Asking questions.

Is that what triggered this vandalism?

As postmistress, Dorcas was the hinge pin to all the other town gossips. She knew everything there was to know. Noted everything that came her way. And was always more than happy to pass it on. This was Sam's second board game with her at the bar.

"What did you do afterwards?" Chad pressed.

"Came directly home. Had to be...oh, eleven or so."

"Did you go into your bathroom?"

Sam shifted on her feet. "Yeah." Then something struck her. "Wait. I didn't turn on the light. It was so late that..." A chill rippled through her. When she'd returned, she had left off all the lights. Her head had hurt even then, probably from the smoke in the tavern. She'd deliberately kept the two-room apartment dark.

"So someone wrote this while you were out," the sheriff concluded.

"Guess so." That was the most obvious explanation. But now that'd she'd had time to think about it...

Last night when she'd gotten home, she had sensed something. Something that wasn't right as she'd stripped off her clothing and crawled into bed. Normally, she would take time to shower and don pajamas. But her headache had overridden any premonition of evil.

*Was he here? When I returned?*

"Usually lock your door while you're gone?" Chad's question brought her back to the present.

"Yeah—yes. Yes, I do." She fought the mounting suspicion. "Don't want anyone to..." She stared at the end table. Was that drawer slightly open? And her old family photos...had someone picked them up? They looked moved. The braided rug seemed askew. She always kept her apartment meticulously tiny.

"How about windows? Leave any open?"

Again, she roused herself to focus on the sheriff. "Sometimes. But I figure since I'm on the second floor..."

He eyed her a moment longer before turning to his deputy. "Okay, Jed. You're done in here for now. Check outside to see if anyone could've climbed in. I'll catch up with you at the office."

The lean man nodded once, then headed out.

"Samantha. Take a seat before you fall over."

What if...?

She was barely aware of Chad leading her to the couch and sitting beside her. For a moment, she studied him. Where'd this new side of his come from? But perhaps he was merely responding to a difference in her. *I'm shakin' like a newborn lamb in early spring.* What had happened to the tough, independent, do-it-yourself woman?

When she realized he still held her hand, she snatched it away.

He said nothing. As usual.

"I suppose, sheriff, you're going to tell me to stop asking questions? Quit poking around?"

"I'd considered it."

"I was just doing my job. I'm a vet, you know."

"I know."

"Animals are my life."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

"I care..." She broke off, another chill gripping her.

"Of course you care." Chad smoothed back her chin-length hair. His touch lingered before he let his hand fall away.

*I care. And he knows it. Leslie knows how much I care about animals.*

Bile rose in her throat. *No, it can't be...*

"Need me to send Doc over? Prescribe some sleeping pills? You look ready to pass out."

"What?" As Sam stared without seeing the man beside her, she fought not to vomit.

Dead animals. Everywhere.

"That's it. I don't want any fussing." He rose and pulled her up with him, like she was nothing. A rag doll.

Next to him her size was insignificant. Besides, he was as strong as a buffalo. Arm about her waist, he supported nearly her full weight with little apparent effort. In moments, he tucked her in bed.

"Probably a waste of breath to say this, but I want you to stay put. For a few hours anyway." Fists planted at hips, Chad towered over her.

Meekness, springing from a source she grew desperate to hide, made Sam nod.

He frowned. "I mean it. I'm tempted to lock you up. For your own good. I don't buy that innocent look in those baby blue eyes."

She yanked the covers up to her chin. "I swear I won't go anywhere."

No, she needed time to think. To come up with some reasonable explanation. Anything was better than her suspicions.

"Okay then." He nodded in apparent satisfaction, then strode across the room. "I'm locking the door behind me."

Solid footsteps traversed the living room. The outside door closed with a thump and the sheriff retreated out of hearing.

Sam gripped the blanket and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. The message on her mirror flashed through her memory.

*Here kitty, kitty.*

She sucked in a ragged breath. That phrase finally hit her. One she herself had used countless times when she was seventeen. Her cat had disappeared. In eleven moves she'd never run off. Never even tried to get outside. Until Sam's father had remarried and moved them into his new wife's home. An open kitchen window had been blamed for the missing cat.

Every evening, for over a month, Sam had stood on the back porch and called. How could she have forgotten? Even for a moment?

She now knew who had written on her mirror. But the mutilations?

For the first time in years she found herself praying. "Please, Lord. Please don't let it be my little brother."

\* \* \*

She waited several days before visiting the Bakers where he worked. Her timing couldn't have been poorer, though. Something was going down at the ranch. The owners were friendly people. Usually. The haunted look in their eyes and pinched lines around their mouths betrayed agitation. Normal banter was missing.

Sam hung around until it got embarrassing to stay. After heading to her truck, she procrastinated further by straightening the cab. How'd her things get to be in such a mess? She shoved items into the glove box and slammed the door. Finally she left.

After driving a mile, she pulled over. Somehow she had to track Leslie down. But over the years, they'd drifted apart. Not that they'd ever been close. She no longer had a working cell number. Almost a decade before, he'd told her about how pretty the area was, but that was the last time they'd really talked. Rarely did they see each other in town. And only a couple times at the O'Connor ranch where he used to work. Leslie never acknowledged her beyond a scant nod. Seemed he preferred that.

Once she got to know him as an adult, she did too.

No one realized they knew each other from childhood. They weren't blood related. Only by marriage. His mother and her father had wed, creating a mess of a blended family. Sam and Leslie had lived under the same roof for just over one year before she married and moved away.

She'd jumped from one disaster into the arms of another. But she'd been anxious to get away from arguing adults. And the brooding eyes of her stepbrother who'd resented having to give up his room for her. For that year, he'd slept on the living room couch.

Behind Sam, a vehicle appeared on the road. It slowed. She watched in amazement as the car pulled over and the man she'd sought got out.

She rolled down her window. "Leslie!"

"I told you to never call me that." He kicked at a rock. It skidded across the paved road and ricocheted off a fencepost.

Though he scowled, she suspected his anger wasn't aimed at her. *Yet*. An odd scar beside his mouth pulsed red. Years before, he'd been injured, running from a bull. The corner of his lip had caught on barbed wire when he dove through the fence to safety.

"You come to see me at the Bakers?"

"Yeah." She chewed her lip a second. "But I didn't want to cause trouble for you while you worked."

"Fat chance of that." His scowl deepened. "They just fired me."

"Fired...?" Only recently, he'd left Daniel O'Connor's in a huff.

"Said they didn't like my methods. If they work, what's the big deal?" He muttered curses on them. "I don't have all day to coddle their horses. What do they expect?"

Best not to ask what had happened. Would only make him angrier.

She recalled one incident when he'd been a teen. Because some neighbor kids had made fun of his name, he'd killed their pet rabbits. With a knife. Sam's father had laid out a bundle to hush that up.

"So what'd'ja come out for?" Leslie studied her. "To visit with your little brother?"

"Was in the area. Thought I'd say hello."

"Hello, huh?" His eyes narrowed. "No other reason?"

Best to be direct. Get this conversation over with. Sam took a quick breath. "Any idea who broke into my apartment?"

"You saying I did?" His mouth settled into a white slash.

She gulped. "N-no. Just wondering if--"

"Like I had time."

Maybe that was part of the problems with the Bakers. He didn't have time to 'coddle' their horses because he was busy elsewhere?

She licked dry lips. "How about animal mutilations? Hear anything about that?"

Something closed down on his face. Wariness replaced the earlier anger. "Nope."

"Know of anyone who likes that sort of activity?"

He took his time answering. "Most guys I know like that sort of...activity."

A shudder ran through her. "Then you're hanging around with the wrong crowd."

He hooked a thumb under his belt, lip curling. "My crowd suits me just fine."

The cry of a soaring hawk distracted her a moment. She chose her next words with care. "So did one of them break into my place?"

"If they had, you wouldn't be here pestering me with questions." His face relaxed further. He grinned, the expression not at all pleasant. "None of them would've left you such a purdy message."

"How'd you know about that?" Unless he was the one who wrote it? Sam's hand edged to the gearshift, ready to yank it into drive and floor it.

"You tell me. You're the one that got that fancy education."

Did he resent that too? Seemed he resented everything in her life from the day she'd set foot in his mother's house. No use telling him she'd busted her buns working full time as she went to school. And nearly killed herself paying off every borrowed dime.

He lowered his voice. "Y'know, it'd be no trouble getting into your place. Piece of cake to climb to the second floor. Maybe slip through a back window where no one from the street could see. You'd never even know. Till it was too late. Why...someone could even be hiding in your closet." He stepped closer. "You'd come home, late at night, and not even suspect someone was there. All that time, you'd be thinking you were safe..."

She jerked her rifle down from the rack. "Back off."

"That was just a fr'instance." He smiled, spreading his hands, but he did step back. "You should be careful with that rifle. Somebody's likely to get hurt."

"I know how to use it." Her fingers tightened on the barrel. "And I'm not afraid to either."

"Well, I'd keep it handy if I were you. Silver Springs may be cute lil' town, but it ain't as safe as everyone thinks. Stuff is happening."

"Like what?" The weird events the sheriff had mentioned flashed through her mind. Could her stepbrother be involved?

His eyes narrowed. "You'll hear. Soon enough."

"So why'd you write that message? What does it mean?"

"Your education didn't do you no good." He sneered. "And you've always been soft. Weak. Just like everyone 'round here. Well I'm not like the rest of you. And soon, folks are going to remember my name."

"Not 'Leslie,' I'm guessing."

"I go by Kit now. Kit Gerard. And don't you ever forget it."

\* \* \*

*He's the one.* Without a doubt, Sam knew her stepbrother was responsible.

She rolled over in bed. Leaning her chin in her hands, she pondered their conversation. Could she live with herself and say nothing? Do nothing? It had been two days and the suppositions wouldn't leave her alone. Though he'd admitted nothing, she knew he was guilty.

*I have no proof.*

Chad would believe her. That wasn't good enough. She needed evidence. Without it, Leslie—no, Kit—wouldn't stop. Her knowing wouldn't deter his sick inclination.

He took pleasure in her suspicions. And counted on the fact that she could or would do nothing to stop him. He felt superior and smart.

His derisive laugh, when her tires had squealed as she'd peeled out, still rang in her ears. Memories from that one critical year echoed through her mind. The pile of dead dragonflies behind the shed, wings missing. The chicken with the one eye.

*My cat.*

Sam sat up in bed and folded her arms over her stomach.

"Miskit," she whispered.

At the shelter, she'd named her "Miss Kitty," then later shortened it. The Siamese was her first, and only, cat. Sam leaned over, willing herself not to imagine how he'd killed her pet.

*Here kitty, kitty.*

She'd called Miskit every night for almost six weeks. All that time, Leslie probably laughed to himself. Every night he'd lay on the couch, reveling in the knowledge that she wasted her time. He'd probably snickered while she'd mourned. No one suspected he was guilty.

Pressing her fingertips to her temples, she allowed herself a few more moments of grief. Then she straightened. Cold determination edged out sorrow.

If he were indeed the one who was mutilating animals, she had to expose him. Without the sheriff finding out the connection between her and her stepbrother. She couldn't bear the thought of how Chad would change towards her.

*He'd learn all about me. Then never have anything to do with me again.*

No, Sam had to solve the mystery. Find proof. And protect herself in the process.

She rose from bed and yanked on clothing. First things first...

Why had Leslie come to her apartment and written on her mirror? To warn her to stop asking questions around town? No, the prank was merely a distraction. The rifled drawers and moved items proved he had searched them. As well as her truck. Things had been shifted inside, not from driving over rough roads as she'd first assumed. He'd been very careful to put things back. Not careful enough, though.

*What was he looking for? What does he think I have?*

Leslie must have guessed she'd located his sites. Must worry she discovered something that would tie him to the mutilations. Something she would recognize as his? If so, she needed to go back to each place and look around. Find whatever he feared would point to him. Something that would prove he was responsible.

Sam retrieved the pistol the sheriff had given her. The weapon was clean, well cared for. After checking her work schedule, she made some calls to free up her afternoon.

As she contemplated Gypsy Gulch, she shivered.

*I have to start there.*

\* \* \*

After she parked her truck out of sight, Sam hiked to the location of the last known kill. She stood above the chasm and scoped out the area. Just to make sure no one was around. The

boulders in the distance offered cover, but foliage impeded the view. She craned her head back to view the ridge, where she'd seen the stranger. Was anyone hiding up there?

A glance at the sun's position told her she needed to quit worrying and get on with her task. Without touching anything, Sam checked the area around the stake. Light, filtering through the leaves of the trees, spotlighted the rope. Squatting, she studied the way it had been tied to the spike. A simple knot and standard rope. Nothing unique about them to point to Leslie.

She peered over the steep incline, noting a narrow ledge below. Seemed improbable anyone had climbed down, even though one spot looked fairly safe. No need when they had a secluded place above.

Her phone rang. She glanced at the name.

"Hey, Chad." Turning, she looked around as she talked.

"Just wanted to let you know that we got evidence of your intruder. Looks like someone climbed in the back alley. Not up the barber shop pole like we first thought."

That lined up with what Leslie had told her. Her heart thumped against her throat. "Oh?"

"Found a boot mark. I think we can match it."

"That—that's great." She held her breath, listening. But not to the man on the phone. The breeze picked up and swirled about her.

*Samantha.*

Who...? She turned again, looking, listening.

*Samantha...run away.*

She gasped, jerking around.

"Sam." Chad's voice sounded sharper than usual. "Where are you?"

"I...I'm..."

"Dorcas said you changed her dog's appointment till tomorrow." He paused. "What are you up to?"

Several gusts shuddered through the trees. The rustling leaves, sounding like crackling paper, made her flesh crawl. Twigs rattled. Rattled like old bones.

"Chad, uh...I'm..." She swiveled. What was that noise? Not a murmuring voice this time. Booted feet?

"You aren't investigating mutilations, are you?"

"Actually, I came to..." In the distance, a sound silenced her. Not the whisper she'd first heard. A voice. A very human voice.

"Samantha?"

Somebody was coming. No, make that *two* somebodies.

She jammed her phone in her back jeans pocket and sprinted to the spot that looked safe to descend. Skidding on loose rock, she scooted over the edge. She swiveled her body and grabbed at the flimsy brush that clung to the cliff wall. Her hat flew off and disappeared into the chasm.

Jamming her toes and clawing at the wall slowed her momentum. But loose stones gave way, making her grapple. For several terrifying seconds, she scrambled for a hold. Any hold. Finally, she stopped on the narrow ledge. The heels of her boots teetered over the edge.

She tried to smother her audible panting.

Conversation drifted down. Two men. She couldn't understand what they said, but she recognized another sound. The whimper of a frightened animal. One man laughed, the malicious timbre sending a shudder through her. *Leslie?* That could be his nasal quality and low *haw-haw*.

She sucked at air. Slowly. Torturously. And listened. From where she clung, she couldn't understand what they said, but she plainly heard the evil intent in their tone. The muffled mewl of an animal again came to her. *Muffled?*

Then she heard something electronic. Something that made her heart freeze.

Cell phone! She slapped at her jeans. It was still open and in her pocket.

"Sam. *Sam!*" Chad's tinny voice floated upward. "You there? What's going on?"

In her haste to silence her phone, she wobbled on the ledge. She grabbed wildly for balance.

Above, the men's talk abruptly stopped. Then a tight, "What was that?"

From her pocket, the sound ceased. Then she heard nothing more. But the quiet was more frightening than anything she'd ever known.

"There." A man spoke.

Had she been spotted? Heart pounding, Sam dared not lift her head.

Again, a stifled whimper echoed down. What kind of animal was that? She couldn't begin to guess.

Careful not to lose her balance, she eased her hand to her side and pulled the pistol from the holster. Her hand was trembling so hard, she feared she would drop the weapon.

*You're gonna have one shot. Just one.*

She took a slow, deep breath. Then she leaned her head back to peer up.

The face, of someone she didn't recognize, came into view, about fifteen feet above and to the right. She saw his widening green eyes, short-cropped blond hair and three days growth on his face.

"It's the vet." He spoke to someone out of sight.

His companion answered, words unintelligible.

Her blood ran cold as the man suddenly lifted a rifle. She raised the pistol and fired.

He jerked back. "She's got a gun!"

The other man said something, tone scathing. She flattened herself against the rock. Her phone beeped. *Now what?*

The sound of the rifle being fired again came close. Much too close. She gasped.

"Can't get a good shot," Blondie spoke.

Again, she heard his companion. And again, silence.

She pressed forward, feeling her pulse thump against the rock. Were they taking aim?

*Don't look.*

She waited. Waited an eternity. Gun still clenched, she listened. With all her might. Nothing happened.

Another rifle shot sounded. She cried out. The bullet felt like it whistled through her hair. Sam pressed forward until rock imprinted on her face.

*How long can I hang on?*

Her body trembled. The exertion of holding herself so rigidly began to hurt. Only a matter of time until they succeeded in shooting her. Or making her fall. She couldn't last forever.

*Chad.* If only she could retrieve her phone. Shifting her weight, she strove to remain as small a target as possible. Pistol in hand, she rested her upraised arm against the wall as she reached into her pocket with her other. But the sound of something tumbling startled her. Stones and dirt showered down. A clump of grass landed on her shoulder and clung. Slowly, it slid off.

She gagged.

Victory sounded in the voices of the men. Sam crushed herself against the rock, determined to overcome the reflexive spasm. More debris fell and an avalanche of soil. Would it never end?

Again, coughing consumed her. She grappled for a hold.

The pistol in her hand went off as she inadvertently squeezed. The recoil, though slight, made her grab wildly for balance. The gun flipped from her grasp. A pause, then a distant metallic clunk followed from below.

Fear rippled through her. She was defenseless. They must know it.

Now what? Would one of them climb down and shove her off? Her throat tightened.

“God,” she rasped. “Oh God, please help.”

She listened to the men. Heard their whispers. What were they planning? Their low laughter reverberated through her. Her heart felt as though it stopped.

Somewhere a phone rang. *Not mine*. Sam pressed herself harder to the wall. Her legs quivered. Shoulders ached. Ribs protested their bruising.

Hours seemed to crawl by. Were they coming? What were they doing? She listened with her whole being, stifling the whimpers that clawed at her throat. Nothing more sounded from the men. *Where are they?*

“Sam?”

A deep voice, from somewhere above, called.

“Sam? Samantha, where are you?”

“Ch-Chad?” Hope surged through her, strengthening her voice. “Here. I’m down here.”

Were the men really gone?

“Hang on a second. I’ll get you outa there.”

The imminent rescue made tears well and spill hotly onto her cheeks.

After a few minutes, the sound of metal clattered nearby. Sam glanced up to see a belt buckle dangling within reach at the end of a rope. After inching her hand upward, she grasped the leather.

“Got it?” Chad called.

“Yes. I think so.”

“Hold tight.”

She did as he commanded. In what felt like only seconds, she flew upward, feet pedaling. The next, she was in his arms.

He crushed her against his chest. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe. *I’m safe*. When his grip relaxed, her knees gave out. Chad picked her up and carried her away from the cliff. Away from danger.

Sometime later, she heard herself sigh. A warm breeze blew against her cheeks, dispelling the lingering nightmare. Sunlight danced across her eyelids. The sweet scent of grassy plains tickled her nose. She sighed again.

A face came into focus. Chad’s. Worry etched his features while he chafed her hand. He knelt on one knee while she lay propped under a tree. Behind him stood a young deputy, one who looked barely out of pigtails. What was her name again? After the sheriff threw the deputy a look, she strolled out of sight. To secure the area? Or give them privacy?

“Hey.” Sam managed to rasp out the word as she gazed at the big man. She must have smiled because he returned the gesture. And expelled a pent-up breath.

“Never a dull moment around you,” he finally said.

“You wouldn’t want it any other way.”

He continued to caress her hand, but she didn’t pull away as she had in her apartment. His touch felt good. So unbelievably good.

His brow clouded. “Who was it?”



She shook her head. "Dunno. Wasn't the stranger I saw the last time I was here. Someone different." She glanced away and debated voicing her suspicions about her stepbrother. She'd not seen him. Barely heard the speaker.

Had it really been Leslie?

"Can you describe him?"

She told Chad about Blondie. Then in a low voice she added, "There were two men. I only saw one."

His gaze met hers steadily. "But you recognized something about the other?"

Chewing her lip, she fought with herself. Maybe he wouldn't find out the whole truth. "Yeah. I think. I'm not certain, but it may have been Kit Gerard." He glanced over his shoulder, then back at her. "Don't say anything for a moment. Not until we're alone again." Straightening, he released her hand.

Jed, the other deputy, came panting up, clutching binoculars. "Spotted a truck and a car driving north. Fast. Too far away to catch license plates."

"Was two of them, then." The sheriff's mouth settled in grim lines. "Someone must've tipped them off before we got here."

Sam clamped her lips together.

"Recognize either vehicle?" He asked his deputy without looking at him.

"Nope."

"Color? Make or model?" The other man took so long answering that Chad swiveled with a jerk. "Well?"

The deputy finally answered. "The car mighta been a cream sedan. With the amount of dust they kicked up, I didn't get a real good look. Truck was rust color. I think. Couldn't determine the make." His gaze flicked to her.

Was he watching for her response?

"Ms. Farrell didn't see much. Can't give us a good description of her attacker. Unfortunately." Chad's gaze returned to her while he continued to talk to the deputy. "Only solid lead is the vehicles. Put out an APB."

"Will do." Jed lingered a moment longer, then turned and headed in the direction from which he'd come.

What was that all about? Why withhold information from the deputy?

"I heard a phone ring," she offered when they were alone again. "One of theirs."

Chad's brow lowered as he squatted beside her. "So they were tipped off."

"I guess. But if they hadn't been..." She shuddered.

He tenderly pressed her shoulder. Sighing, she closed her eyes and resisted the persistent horror.

"You're safe now, Samantha."

"I know." She managed a tremulous smile.

His hand lingered a moment longer. *How can such a big man have such a gentle touch?*

She took a shaky breath. "Can you take me home?"

"Think you can walk?" His deep voice softened.

"Yeah. But hold a sec."

He obliged.

Sam's eyes burned anew as she sought his hand. Next to his, hers looked like a tiny bird. It took a moment before she could trust her voice. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

He glanced away, then back, the corner of his mouth spasming. "Glad to."

"How'd you find me?"

"Guessed."

"Was a good one." She expelled a pent-up breath. "Sorry I lost your pistol."

"At least *you* aren't. Lost, that is." He ducked his head for a moment, brow furrowing. "Sam, you don't respond well to commands, so I'm asking...could you try'n lay low for a bit? Until this whole thing blows over?"

"What whole thing?" She sat up. "What else is going on?"

He shook his head. "Stuff," was all he would say. He added slowly, "I can't...can't do my job and worry about you. I'm not good at that kind of multitasking."

Heart squeezing, she gazed up at him. "But will it be over soon?"

"Hope so."

A shiver rippled through her. She'd been close to death. Too close. And never wanted to be again.

Sam met his gaze steadily. "Fine by me. I can make you that promise. Gladly."

Lines on his face eased while his shoulders relaxed. "All right then. Let's get outa here."

\* \* \*

The animal mutilations stopped, but death didn't. Murder, to be precise. Simone, a young woman who worked at the O'Connor ranch, had been found shortly after the incident at Gypsy Gulch. Everyone assumed that the Indian Sam had spotted at Gypsy Gulch was the killer. Others had seen him in the area, so blamed him.

Recalling her promise to lay low, Sam forced herself not to speculate. To anyone.

As she stood at the funeral lunch, talking with her friend, she watched for the sheriff. When he arrived, so many people clamored for his attention she had to wait. She finally caught his eye and indicated with a tilt of her head they needed to talk. Several minutes passed before he escaped from those who peppered him with questions.

She lingered by the corral, not far from Megan's horse. Still amazed by the animal's intelligence and beauty, Sam studied the stallion. This was the wild rogue that had once terrorized the land? Her friend had worked wonders with him.

"What's up?" Chad interrupted her musing.

She scanned the area to make sure no one could overhear. "That day at Gypsy Gulch..." She swallowed a nervous lump. "I think Simone was there too."

He glanced away, then back at her. "Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"That day...well, I wasn't exactly in my right mind. I heard what I assumed was an animal. Sounded like one. I didn't put it together until..." She released a tortured breath.

*They would have killed me too.*

He took a moment to reply. "Considering the evidence, it fits."

"So you knew?"

"Suspected. For a couple days."

"I've been beating myself up about—"

"Wasn't anything you could do. Even if you told us that day, we would've been too late to help her."

Was it so? Relief washed over Sam. Her fingers trailed the rough wood of the fence. "You're sure then, that...that Kit did it?"

The sheriff tilted his head. "No. But I *am* sure that you haven't told me everything you know about him."

She refused to meet his gaze.

"He disappeared." Chad spoke slowly. "Nobody's seen him for a while."

"So I've heard."

His brown eyes met and held hers. "When were you going to tell me you two were related?"

The words burst out of her mouth. "We are *not* related. He's only my stepbrother." She clamped her lips shut, afraid to look at him. Afraid of what she might see in his face now that he knew. "Actually, I planned to tell you. Soon as everything settled down."

*Liar.*

He swiped the air with one hand. "We just had a funeral. Things don't appear to be settling down."

His strident tone said it all. Chad had dug into Leslie's past and her name had popped up. Obviously, he knew all about her now too. Her unstable childhood, stripper mother, abusive father. If he'd investigated further, and Sam knew he did, he would know about her divorce, the string of bad relationships.

The baby she'd given up for adoption.

How could he forgive her for relinquishing a child when he too had been abandoned?

Still unable to look him in the eye, she spoke in a low voice. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I suspected Kit was responsible for the mutilations. But I had no proof."

"Not your job to furnish proof. That's mine."

*True.* She looked past Megan's horse, the corral...anywhere but in Chad's face. *Might as well let him know how big a failure you are.*

"Something else you should know. Something that I didn't remember until yesterday." She paused.

"I'm listening."

"I found this." She dug the old coin from her pocket and held it out to him. "I was so intent on the mutilations that I forgot all about it." As he studied the silver, she rushed on. "Remember that night? You noticed my torn jeans? I'd put them on a shelf, intending to repair them later. Yesterday, I moved them. The coin fell out..."

"Hmm. Silver dollar." He squinted at the worn metal. "Late eighteen hundreds. Must be worth something."

"Not really. I checked." When he fixed his gaze on her she added, "It's not in good shape. And so many were minted that year, it's worth ten bucks. If that."

"What's this got to do with anything?"

"I found it alongside the road. Near Gypsy Gulch. I'd forgotten I'd once mentioned it to Dorcas. In the bar." She rushed on. "That's why...why Kit came to my apartment. I think he was looking for it."

"You sure he was the one who broke in?"

She nodded. "He pretty much admitted that to me."

"And you think this coin is his?"

"Pretty sure. I remember him having it, or one like it, when we were kids. He never went anywhere without his lucky coin." She took a deep breath. "I picked it up once. When he saw me, he freaked out. He was really possessive about his things."

Including his bedroom. Guess he hadn't forgiven her for getting him booted out. Not that it had been her decision. But to her stepbrother, that didn't seem to matter.

Chad fingered the coin. "I'll find someone who can ID this as his."

"And the boot print on my windowsill. Don't forget about that."

"Oh, I haven't."

She blew out her breath. *Glad that's over.*

But was she really? She knew what would happen now. The sheriff would go back to his investigation...and she would go back to her life.

And that would be that.

She expected him to walk away, but he didn't. For some reason he continued to lean against the fence as though they weren't yet done talking.

Sam risked a glance up.

His eyebrows rose. "You done keepin' secrets?"

*Am I?* Decades of hiding things ate at her. That had always been her way. One she'd learned well. Keep her mouth shut and survive. Guard any and all secrets. Including her own.

But what was the use any longer?

"Yeah. I am now." Her voice quavered a little.

"Samantha." He waited until she again met his gaze. "I'm glad."

She sucked in a slow breath, wondering at his deepening tone.

"And thanks for keeping your promise. Of laying low. My mind's at ease now about you."

*Really?* She studied his features. Where was the disgust she was certain would be there? The rejection?

She saw only relief and...? What was it? Compassion? Love?

He looked away to watch a few people in the distance before again addressing her. "You know, don't you, that I have someone patrolling the streets by your apartment. Every night."

She slowly nodded. Yes, she'd seen them.

And she'd also seen Chad. His frame was easy to recognize, silhouetted against the streetlight. The many times she'd looked out her window after midnight, he'd been there.

"I feel better knowing you're safe." His husky voice sent a tingle through her.

She gulped.

"And though I know you feel responsible for your stepbrother, whatever he's done is no reflection on you. In my book, you *aren't* related. Not one bit."

For some reason, her eyes burned.

Chad straightened, his mouth settling into grim lines. "Don't worry about Gerard. We'll nail him."

\* \* \*

She had a lot to think about over the next month. And not just because of that one funeral. Her friend, Megan was hurt. Seriously. The sheriff's department was involved in a shootout at Gypsy Gulch and Kit Gerard and his blond-haired buddy were killed. Chad matched the boot print, proving he'd been the one who broke into her apartment. Though the coin didn't prove her stepbrother was involved in the animal mutilations, it was enough evidence for Sam. Especially when those crimes ceased with his death.

After all the mysteries of Gypsy Gulch were solved, life settled down as Chad promised. She went about her business. He went about his. But something had changed. She had changed. After restlessly pacing across her living room one afternoon, she came to a decision.

*The time for layin' low is over.*

Hand shaking, she dialed a now-familiar number.

"What's up, Samantha?"

"Working late tonight?"

"No need. Been fairly quiet. Early evenings for us all." Chad fell silent.

"Can we meet at your place? 'Bout an hour?"

"You're not more than a hundred paces from my office. Why not here?"

"I'd rather not." She didn't want to be the subject of the Dorcas *et al.* gossip group. Not until Sam and the sheriff settled a few things.

A pause before he answered. "I'll be there in an hour."

Dolling herself up was something she'd never been good at. But tonight was different. At least, she hoped. After a quick shower, she donned her normal ensemble of a button-down cotton shirt, jeans and boots. Then she studied herself in the mirror wondering what else to do. No use. She shied away from the makeup in her cabinet and settled for light pink lip-gloss.

Sam was rocking on his front porch when he drove up. Not that she needed to wait outside in the cooling evening.

After a nod in her direction, he opened the door and indicated she should precede him. He flicked on that one lone bulb in the kitchen. Neither of them spoke as he got out coffee and dumped it in the maker. Soon dark brew dripped into the waiting pot.

Blast him. He wasn't going to make this easy.

"I got to thinking..." Knees suddenly wobbly, she plopped on a kitchen chair.

"Sounds like a plan." He crossed his arms and leaned against the counter.

*I am such a chicken.* This took more courage than castrating a five hundred pound bull or cleaning the teeth of a Rottweiler.

She took a deep breath, opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. Well, if he wasn't going to make things easy, she wouldn't either. "I was thinking I owed you a pistol."

That threw him. Surprise flicked across his face. *Good.*

Then he grinned. "You put on lipstick and drove all the way out here to tell me that?"

"Well...seemed a good start." She pulled on her earlobe. "You expecting something else?"

Oh, yeah, he was. She suddenly realized the photo of his wife was missing. The spot on the wall was conspicuously empty. Sam's heart started to hammer. Hard.

His fingers twitched. "Expecting...or maybe wishing."

"Oh?" She kept her tone innocent.

He said nothing for a moment. "Truth to tell, my deputy already retrieved the pistol. So you don't owe me anything."

She slapped her palms on the table. "What?"

"Rock climbing's her hobby." Chad shrugged. "But your hat was too far gone. Sorry."

She recalled it flying off as she'd slid over the cliff edge. When he said nothing more, she added with a touch of impatience, "Blast you, Chad. You can be a very difficult man."

"And you, a difficult woman."

So true.

"I promised to not keep secrets anymore." She inhaled. Noisily. *Get it said!* "So doesn't it stand to reason we're perfect for each other?" The words came out in a rush. Gripping the edge of the table, she waited.

A spark of hope lit his eyes.

At least, she trusted it was hope.

He finally answered. "I was thinking that very thing. 'Bout four years ago."

"Four?" The question came out a little breathlessly. "*Years?*"

"But you were fairly new to this area. Had to get to know you a bit first. And you me."

She rose to her feet. A little unsteadily. "Four? Really? Why'd you wait so long to say anything?"

"You were new to the area. A doctor of veterinarian medicine. Bound and determined to make your mark on this territory. Soon to be rich."

She laughed. "Boy, did I fool you."

"I'm just a sheriff." Chad spread his hands. "Small house. Tiny plot of land..."

She went to him. Grabbing his hand, she stared up into his face. "They don't matter. You have so much to offer. More than I...or any woman...could ever hope for." Her throat tightened. "Tender. Faithful..."

When he tugged gently, she complied.

The top of her head barely reached his chin as he engulfed her in his embrace. For once in her life, she truly felt cherished. Protected. Loved.

Chad wasn't the most dapper or good-looking man she'd ever met. And not a talker who said all the things he thought she wanted to hear. But he was rock-steady. Everything she dreamed of. And for some unfathomable reason, he loved her.

Even before he whispered the words, Sam knew. And she sighed with contentment.

She tilted her head back. Before he leaned down, she held up her hand. "One more thing."

His brows rose. "And that is?"

"Don't let this lipstick fool you. I wore a fancy dress for Daniel O'Connor's wedding. I don't think I can put on another anytime soon."

"We can work around that." He chuckled as he tenderly caressed the hair from her cheek. "Anything more you need to tell me?"

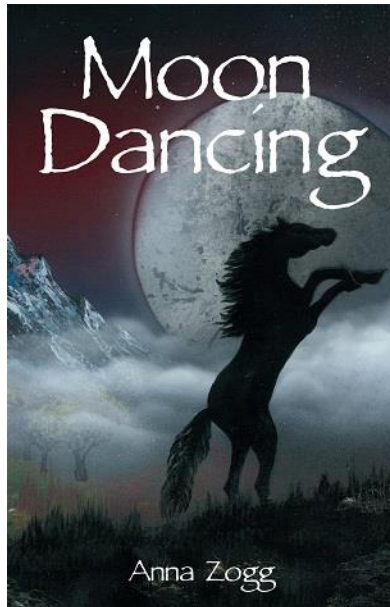
"Nope. Except perhaps, I love you." Everything else, he already knew.

And that was the way it should be.

~~

*Author's note: If you enjoyed this story about Gypsy Gulch, you can read more about Sam, Megan and the mysterious Indian in **Moon Dancing**. Follow Megan Gillespie as she solves the other mysteries of Gypsy Gulch.*

Excerpt from *Moon Dancing* by Anna Zogg



## CHAPTER 1

A scream—long and agonizing—ripped the air. The hair on Megan Gillespie’s neck stood on end while the scent of spring rain filled her senses. She peered through the pickup’s windshield, seeing nothing beyond a mound of pinyon pine and withered grass. Shouts of men and the nervous snorting of horses battered her. *What is happening?* She flung open the door. As she sprinted up the dusty rise, she tripped on her long jeans skirt.

The scene below riveted her.

Like a pack of wolves, a group of men circled a black stallion. Head flailing, the horse fought uncountable ropes. He reared, hooves striking blindly. Foam flecked his neck, teeth bared and mouth opened in a silent shriek. The setting sun painted his soaked hide in blood-colored lather. Dust boiled upwards, the air choked with pinpricks of glittering gold.

The horse fought in vain. His cry, one of rage and impotence, shuddered through Megan.

*Pain!* She doubled over, as though punched in the stomach. *Can’t breathe.* Her eyes burned from the agony.

The stallion again reared, legs lashing out.

“Hold him. I said, hold him!” A tall man yanked a lariat from the hands of one of the men.

The next moment, the stallion lunged forward. Men scattered. Rope tore through the gloves of one cowhand, the sound like a zip-line at high speed. He howled.

*The stallion's getting away!* Megan's heart leaped with hope. *He's getting—* Joy crumpled into terror. The horse charged directly at her.

~~

*Copyright © 2013 by Anna Zogg, all rights reserved*

Purchase this book on [Kindle](#)



### About the Author

**Anna Zogg** has always been fascinated by the west: ranch life, mustangs, and the tough men and women who sought to tame it. Her fondest memories are of summers she spent riding her horse, Brandy, and the day she participated in a rodeo. Her first novel, *Moon Dancing*, was born out of her lifelong love of the west and the discovery of her own Native American heritage. She and her husband, John, currently live in Utah.