

Rough Rider (Hot Cowboy Nights Book 2)

By Victoria Vane

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Book #2 of Hot Cowboy Nights

Two wounded hearts...
Janice Combes has two loves: bucking bulls and Dirk Knowlton. But Dirk only has eyes for a dazzling rodeo queen. How can Janice ever compete while mired ankle-deep in manure? Exchanging playful banter with Dirk is all Janice can expect-until the stormy night he knocks on her door dripping wet and needing a place to crash.

Daring to dream again...
Dirk Knowlton is living the cowboy dream. Life should be good-roping, branding, bucking broncs, riding bulls-but there's a void he can't seem to fill. After getting hung up by a bull, he wonders if this is really the life he wants. Restless and rebellious, he joins the Marines determined to prove himself...but there's a certain cowgirl he can't forget.

When a battle-scarred Dirk returns to his Montana ranch he finds Janice has come back home to lick her own wounds. When old dreams have turned to dust, can two wary hearts take another chance on love?

Hot Cowboy Nights Series:
Slow Hand (Book 1)
Rough Rider (Book 2)
Sharp Shootin' Cowboy (Book 3)

Praise for Victoria Vane:
"Erotic and sexy...absolutely marvelous." -*Library Journal*, Top E-Book Romance of 2012
"The Mistress of Sensuality does it again!!" -Swept Away By Romance Blog
"With Ms Vane's trademark prose and touches of humor-this is once again a brilliant story by a gifted writer." -Romantic Historical Lovers Reviews

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Editorial Review

Review
"Their story is steeped with sadness but it is equally heart warming and gives all believers in romance hope. This was a truly poignant story." - ***Life Books and More***

"This is one of those books you have to buy to get the full story there is so much in it . Its not a mushy type romance but to me more of how real life goes there is so many twist and turns in this book . Its a must read." - ***Deborah Favorite Books***

"Victoria Vane blew me away yet again with her writing." - ***Multitasking Mommas, 5 Stars***

"The characters form "*Rough Rider*" were all so well developed, well portrayed, colorful, richly developed and believable that seemed to come alive on the pages as you read. Let's not forget the hot steamy sex scenes that his author knows how to give us so well. " - ***Arlena's Book Reviews***

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"This is one of those books you have to buy to get the full story there is so much in it. Its not a mushy type romance but to me more of how real life goes there is so many twist and turns in this book . Its a must read." - ***Deborah's Blog of Book Reviews***

"If you're looking for a hot cowboy story with a little heartache, look no further. *Rough Rider* (book #2 in the Hot Cowboy Nights series) has it all... A sweet, yet hot story, that's a quick easy read which you won't regret." - ***Fictional Men's Page for Book Ho's***

"Ms. Vane entertained me... had me at the edge of my seat with twists and turns, and even had me scream at Dirk's stupidity, so she completely EARNS my top score of 5 fingers up & 10 toes! I just have some itsy bitsy advice for Ms. Vane for the future, PLEASE WRITE FASTER!" - ***Avon Romance***

"Another winner. It was a really good tale in the rough and tumbled world of cowboys and bull riding... if you get a chance, check it out and also, check out [Victoria Vane's] other books. You won't be disappointed." - ***BTS eMag***

About the Author
Victoria Vane is an award-winning author of smart and sexy romance. Her works range from historical to contemporary settings and include everything from wild comedic romps to emotionally compelling erotic romance. Her collective works of fiction have received twenty-one reviewer awards and nominations to include Library Journal Best E-Book romance of 2012 and five RONE nominations for The Devil DeVere series, as well as two RONE Finalists for Treacherous Temptations and The Sheik Retold.Look for her hot new contemporary cowboy series coming from Sourcebooks in Fall of 2014.

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Chapter 1

Casper, Wyoming

Seated on the top rail above the bull pen, Janice watched with growing impatience as the final riders finished. Unlike most of the girls she'd grown up with, she'd never had much interest in can chasing. Sure there was good money in it, but she just didn't see the challenge in running circles around barrels.

Bulls, on the other hand-massively muscled, notoriously unpredictable, and dangerously aggressive-were her passion. She'd been raised with cattle and had fed bawling calves from the earliest time she could remember, but bucking bulls provided her family's real living.

While the final scores were announced and the barrels cleared from the arena, Janice hopped down from her perch. Time to get back to work. Although she could have used some help tonight, there was none to be had. Ready or not, she was Combes' Bucking Bulls' new chute boss. Janice walked the length of the pens, inspecting the animals and watching for any sign of trouble as the other stock hands prodded and loaded their animals into their respective chutes.

There were at least two dozen riders already surrounding the bull pens. Some were shooting the shit, and others were immersed in their preparations. Janice looked casually over the group for the one cowboy who made her pulse race. He was one of the early draws, but Dirk Knowlton hadn't made his appearance yet.

Although he'd never looked sideways at her, Janice had followed Dirk's rodeo career since high school, when they'd competed on the same team. He'd ridden rough stock while she'd competed in breakaway roping. She'd always enjoyed working with ropes and livestock. Roping required speed, skill, and near-perfect coordination between horse and rider-practical skills that were invaluable on a working ranch-and Janice was nothing if not practical. She'd been real good at it too. Probably could have gotten a scholarship or even gone pro if her family's needs hadn't kept her tied to the ranch.

In the end, she'd gone to work full-time for her father, and Dirk had won a full scholarship to Montana State. She'd run into him on occasion since then, mainly during branding season when all the ranches helped each other out, but he'd never taken notice of her then either. He'd been too wrapped up in Rachel Carson. Along with half the boys at Twin Bridges High, he'd only had eyes for Rachel. Gangly Janice had never stood a chance against the pert and pretty, blue-eyed blond.

Since graduation she'd rarely run into Dirk, usually no more than a hat-tipping at the ranching co-op or the stock sale, but now that she was working the rodeos, their paths had once more crossed-not that it made any difference. Little had changed. Rachel was still the rodeo queen, leading the grand entry glittering with rhinestones, while Janice looked on from the rough stock chutes, mired ankle-deep in manure and smelling like the livestock.

Even now that she'd finally filled out in all the right places, she was either completely tongue-tied or jabbered like an idiot whenever Dirk came around, which was every day for the past week. It wasn't just his rugged good looks that made her palms sweat-there was something about Dirk, besides his long and lanky physique, that put him head and shoulders above the rest.

With her heart lurching into her throat, Janice watched as the cowboy of her dreams swaggered up to the holding pens. Clad in ass-hugging denim with leather chaps flapping, a white Stetson shadowing his ice-blue eyes, and a rigging bag slung over one broad shoulder, he threw his rope over the corral panel in preparation for his ride.

Now or never, Janice. He'll be called up any minute.

With her heart hammering, she inhaled for courage and licked her lips with a tongue that suddenly felt as dry as sandpaper. "I watched you on Outlaw Josie Wales in the second go 'round yesterday," she blurted.

"Why thank you, ma'am." Dirk tipped his hat with a mile-wide grin.

"You about spurred his head off," she continued. "It was one of the best rides I ever did see."

Grady Garrison leaned over from his perch on the adjoining pen and spat a wad of dip. "Good thing Pretty Boy scored so high on the broncs, 'cause he sure as shit won't make the cut on the bulls."

"That so?" Dirk paused in prepping his rope, his eyes meeting Grady's for only a second. "Funny, as I recall it, just last week in Red Lodge I made the whistle while your ass hit the dirt." He went back to work, crushing the lump of rosin and wrapping his gloved hand around the bull rope.

Grady jumped down from the pen with narrowed, steel-colored eyes. "I'm still going into the short round with the high score. You're delusional as shit if you think to beat me." His shoulders were thrown back and his thumbs hooked in his belt loops-the ones that supported the huge Collegiate Champion Bull Rider buckle.

Any stranger who didn't know them as longtime rodeo buddies would surely think fists were about to fly, but Janice suspected it was just pre-ride posturing. Cowboys, as a rule, were ridiculously competitive. Still, she bit her lip at the tension of rising testosterone.

"Maybe you're right, Grady, but a closed mouth gathers no boots."

"What're you sayin'? You think I'm all talk?"

Dirk shrugged. "I think a lotta rodeo legends are made by a flannelmouth on a bar stool. So maybe you'll wanna put your money where that big fat mouth is?"

She wondered how far they'd want to take this pissing contest. Dirk was a decent bull rider, but the smaller and wiry Grady was one of the best. Unfortunately, like a lot of cowboys, he too often let his mouth run off, and his ego get in the way of his good sense.

"All right, Pretty Boy. How 'bout the lowest score on the next ride buys the drinks tonight? And none of that cheap shit either."

Dirk stood up straight, rolled his neck and shoulders, and then extended his hand. "You're on."

Grady accepted it with a laugh. Janice breathed a sigh of relief. The announcer gave the final scores on the barrel racing and then broadcast the imminent start of the bull riding.

Grady puffed up like a fighting cock as soon as audience attention swiveled to their end of the arena. "Now the real rodeo begins."

"Plenty of people watch the other events too," Janice protested. "The broncs are my personal favorite." She darted a glance to Dirk. "Classier than the bull riding."

"Bullshit," Grady scoffed. "You know as well as I do that the bulls are what eighty percent of these people come for. No one really gives a rip about all the warm-up acts, though team ropin's probably the worst." He looked to Janice with an air of expectancy.

"Don't ask why, Janice," Dirk warned. "It's his worst joke-and the one he always uses when he's itching for a bar fight."

"Oh yeah?" Janice couldn't stifle her grin. "Why's that, Grady?"

Grady smirked. "Because team ropin's a lot like jacking off, Sweet Cheeks-kinda fun to do, but no one wants to watch it."

Dirk rolled his eyes and Janice shook her head with a derisive snort. Grabbing her flank ropes and hook, she methodically moved down the row of massively muscled, shifting, snorting bovines. Janice spoke in low, calm tones as she handled each animal. She knew every bull in the circuit by name and endeavored to treat each one with the care and respect they deserved. To her annoyance, Grady followed her, jabbering on about nothing, while she flanked her bulls. It was damned irritating how the cocky SOB refused to be ignored.

After finishing with Sudden Impact, Janice double-checked the bulls in the pens. When she returned, Dirk was standing on the platform above Magnum Force, armored with his Kevlar vest. "You the gunner?" she asked.

"Yup." Dirk nodded. "Drew this big bastard. New one, isn't he?" He jerked his head toward the massive Brahma shifting restlessly in his pen.

"Yeah. He's new all right."

"What happened to that ol' sonofabitch, The Enforcer? Did you retire him?"

"Hell no. Daddy sold him. Pocketed a big chunk of change and still had enough left to buy two replacements that he found down at this shithole farm in Arkansas. Mag here is one of 'em." She nodded to the bull.

While her father had made a respectable name in stock contracting, she'd always felt his methods were a bit hit-or-miss. He'd struck it lucky enough times to stay in the business, but would never make it to the top because he was too quick to sell his best bulls for cash in hand. To Janice's frustration, he'd never focused on the business of breeding his own stock. They had the land and the know-how, so it seemed a wasted opportunity.

Janice, on the other hand, saw a future in bucking bulls. While traditional rodeo was dying out, struggling just to break even, the new bull-riding associations were packing 'em in, even in the big cities. It was the new "extreme" sport. Breeding the rankest bulls for the toughest cowboys was her dream-what she was secretly working toward. She just needed the right foundation bull. She'd already wondered if Mag might be the one. If he made it big on this circuit, she was determined to buy him out for breeding-no matter the cost.

"I detect a pattern here. Outlaw Josie Wales? Magnum Force?" Dirk chuckled. "Your ol' man's a real Clint Eastwood fan, isn't he?"

"Yeah. He's always named his rough stock after favorite movies but the primest of the lot are called after Clint Eastwood flicks. Be careful with this one, Dirk. I think Mag just might be the rankest bull we've ever had. He's no chute fighter, but once that gate flies open, he's unpredictable as hell."

"Oh yeah? If you've got any other secrets to share, I'm all ears."

Grady snorted and spat another black wad of dip. "You so scared of eatin' dirt that you're asking the stock hands for lessons?"

"Damned straight, Grady. Her father owns the bull and I'm one ride away from winning the overall."

"Shit. If you're so hard up for teachin', you shoulda just watched me ride that badass." He jerked his head at Texas Tornado, the notorious bull he'd ridden for a high score of eighty-six points.

"Your style wouldn't cut it with Mag, Grady," Janice interjected.

"Oh yeah?" Grady pulled out another chuck of wintergreen Skoal and stuffed it under his lower lip. "There ain't a bull in the world that can't be rode, sweetheart-"

"Or a cowboy that can't be throwed," Janice finished with a smirk of her own. Although one of the top contenders, Grady needed to be taken down a peg or two and Janice hoped Dirk would be the one to do it.

"And just how many bulls have you rode now, sweet pants?"

"None," she shot back. "But that doesn't mean I'm ignorant. Maybe you forgot I grew up with these animals. I know when I load 'em what kinda mood they're in and most times how they're gonna act."

"That may be, but all bets are off once you're actually forking the SOB with the flank rope on."

Janice shrugged. "I'm just sayin' look out if you ever draw this one, Grady. Usually the bulls clue you in on what they're thinking, but not this one. When you assume he's gonna spin into your hand, he blows, or he looks like he's fading right and then ducks off left, or maybe takes a sudden nosedive and snaps his head like ol' Bodacious did. He's smart as hell and he'll set you up for a big hurt in a heartbeat. This bull's gonna rearrange a lot of cowboy faces in his new career."

"Then it's too bad Grady didn't draw him this go round," Dirk taunted his buddy. "Rearranging his ugly mug could only be an improvement."

Grady grabbed his crotch. "It ain't my face the buckle bunnies are after, Pretty Boy."

Janice ignored the vulgar exchange. "Mag's an ornery bastard if you yank a foot on him. Ride him too aggressive and I promise he'll eat you up. If you don't want to be the first one to kiss that bull, Dirk, you'd do well to spare the spurs."

Dirk attached the bell to the rope and gave her a crooked smile that revealed a deep left-side dimple. "I hear you loud and clear."

Every bucking horse and bull presented its own challenge, and Mag was new and an unknown entity. A savvy rider studied his draw before his ride and talked to the stock hands. She was glad Dirk was willing to listen.

"Why all this concern about that dink?" Grady muttered, jerking his head in Dirk's direction.

"Maybe 'cause he actually asked my advice."

"How 'bout I give you some advice, Sweet Cheeks? Don't waste yourself waitin' around on Dirk. Everyone knows he has it bad for Rachel. They've been playing it hot and heavy for years. 'Sides, there's better cowboys willing to keep company with a sweet thing like you."

"Better cowboys?" She let her gaze flicker over Grady for a fraction of a second. "Like who?"

Grady grinned big, broad, and bad. "Why, yours truly, of course."

"Really?" She cracked a smile despite herself. "Does anyone besides you and your mama share this grandiose opinion of Grady Garrison?"

"Oh yeah, baby doll. Ask any buckle bunny from here to Houston."

"That so?" Her smile instantly faded. "Then I ain't interested."

"Maybe I just need the right woman to make me wanna settle down."

Janice snorted outright. "What a crock! Does that line of bull really work for you?"

He grinned shamelessly. "More times than I could count."

"You're the one who's wasting your breath, Grady. I don't sleep around, especially not with horndog cowboys."

Ignoring her racing pulse, Janice double-checked the flank while Grady hooked Dirk's rope around the animal's massive barrel. A moment later, Dirk climbed up and over the chute, then quietly lowered himself onto the bull's back. He warmed the rosin-coated rope before tightening it around his bull and then tied himself on. He'd passed on a protective helmet to keep his white Stetson instead.

"Who said anything about mattress dancing?" Grady smirked. "I'm only offering you a drink after the rodeo-Dirk will be buying of course."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Then how 'bout another wager? One just between you and me?"

"What kind of wager?" She knew better than to commit to anything Grady came up with without hearing all the details first.

"If I beat his ride, you'll go to the party with me after the rodeo."

"Isn't it a private event, only for the team members?"

"Yeah," he replied. "But I'm on the team and I'm inviting you."

"I'll think about it, Grady." Janice eyed the bull, hoping to hide the sudden flush in her face. Mag appeared deceptively docile, but there was a dangerous fire blazing in his eyes. Her gut told her the bull was gonna blow.

As the daughter of a stock contractor, she'd seen more rodeos than she could remember and more wrecks than she could ever forget, but no matter how hard she tried, she'd never become desensitized to the gory aftermath of any bull ride gone bad-usually resulting in lots of blood and mangled bones twisted at unnatural angles.

Up to this point, the finals had been surprisingly free of injuries, but the bull riding was where most of them happened. The last seconds in the chute never failed to send Janice's heart into her throat. She'd kept a close tally of Dirk's points and knew just covering this bull was all he needed. She hoped he wouldn't slough off her advice about spurring. Her fingers closed tightly around the cold steel of the chute panel as Dirk raised

his right arm and nodded at the gateman.

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Claudia Weidner:

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Helen Johnson:

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Linda Doyle:

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