



Her Cowboy Dilemma (Coffee Creek, Montana Book 2)

By C.J. Carmichael



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Going Home Shouldn't Be This Hard...

Cassidy Lambert traded in Montana's big sky country for the big-city lights—forever. Until a potentially devastating equine illness threatens her family's ranch, and Cassidy is needed at home to help. She thinks she knows what she wants from life, but the more she's around sexy veterinarian Dan Farley, the more confused she gets.

When Cassidy comes back to the open Western landscape Dan loves, she's nothing but a beautiful burr under his saddle. She stomped on his heart once before, and he's not eager for another go-around. But he just can't keep himself away from those green eyes and sweet curves. It's a good thing she'll soon be gone again. Because he can't trust her—or himself—when she's around!



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Editorial Review

About the Author

CJ Carmichael gave up the glamour of income tax forms and double-entry bookkeeping when she sold her first book in 1998. She has now written over 30 novels for Harlequin, been twice nominated for RWA's RITA award, as well as Romantic Time's Career Achievement award. CJ lives in Calgary, Alberta, with her partner, Mike, and the family cat, Penny.

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What did it say about her relationship with her family that the person Cassidy Lambert was most excited to see when she got home wasn't a person at all, but her border collie, Sky?

Sky had been her father's birthday surprise for her fourteen years ago. Sky was loyal, loving and, most important, *uncomplicated*. Cassidy knew, no matter what, that Sky would always love her and think she was the most wonderful person on the planet.

The same could not be said of her family.

Cassidy lowered the driver's side window of her vintage 1980 Ford pickup to let in the warm spring air, then cranked up the tunes as she barreled along the 80 toward home. She knew she should reduce her speed, not only to avoid a ticket but also to prolong the drive, which she was quite enjoying.

But she was on a high. After five long years she was finally done with late nights at the library, relentless assignments and tough exams. She'd worked hard to complete the Accounting Master's Program at Montana State University, but she'd done it, and hopefully soon would follow a high-paying job at one of the top accounting firms in Billings.

Josh Brown—her friend and would-be boyfriend if she could make up her mind about that—also had plans to move to Billings. Josh had wanted to come with her to Coffee Creek Ranch. He said it was time he met her family.

"I wouldn't be so anxious if I were you," she'd told him. He thought she was teasing, but she wasn't.

"They can't be that bad. Look at you. Unless you were adopted?"

"No such luck." She had her mother's delicate features and the long, lanky body that came from the Lambert side of the family. She had a soft heart—like her father. But was also headstrong and stubborn—like her mom.

Yet despite all the family resemblances, she'd always been a misfit. Part of the problem came from being the only girl in a family with three boys—four if you counted her foster brother, Jackson, who'd been with the family since she was nine. She knew it wasn't her imagination that her mother was harder on her than the guys. And her father had treated her differently, too, when he was alive.

For one thing, he'd built three cottages by the small lake on their property for each of his sons to live in. But nothing for her.

No doubt he'd expected her to one day get married and go live with her husband. But being excluded that way had hurt.

And it still did.

The boys had been relentless teases, too. They didn't mean to be cruel, but they never cut her a break, either. Even though she could ride as well as any of them, she couldn't match them in strength. And, oh, how they'd loved to taunt her about that. Especially Brock...

Tears fogged her vision, and she slid her sunglasses up on her head so she could rub them away. Though almost a year had passed since the accident that had taken her youngest brother's life—just an hour before he'd been about to marry Winnie Hayes—the loss still felt fresh.

Brock may have driven her crazy, but she'd loved him, living in hope that one day he'd stop treating her like a bratty little sister and they might become friends.

Now they would never have that chance.

Cassidy drove over a series of three gentle hills before arriving at the smattering of buildings and the weathered sign proclaiming that she'd arrived at the town of Coffee Creek. She put on her indicator light, intending to stop at the Cinnamon Stick Cafe for some fortification before continuing the last fifteen minutes to the ranch.

It was Wednesday morning, the last week of April, an hour before noon. She'd written her final exam the previous afternoon, had spent a night on the town with all her friends, including Josh, then loaded her car for an early departure that hadn't included breakfast.

So she was hungry.

She angle-parked in front of the pretty cafe that was owned by Brock's former fiancée. Winnie had taken Brock's death really hard and had gone to live at her parents' farm in Highwood immediately following the funeral. Cassidy stayed in touch with her via Facebook and knew that Winnie hoped to return to Coffee Creek eventually. Apparently she'd developed some health issues that weren't serious, but required some time to settle.

In the meantime her cafe was being operated by Winnie's best friend—and Cassidy's new sister-in-law—Laurel. Laurel Sheridan had flown in from New York for Brock and Winnie's wedding and had ended up extending her stay to take care of Winnie's cafe while her friend was convalescing. She'd also fallen in love with Corb and the two had been married last September in New York City.

Then in March they'd had a baby—adorable little Stephanie Olive Lambert was another reason Cassidy was stopping at the Cinnamon Stick. Hopefully Laurel and the baby would be there.

She was dying for a cuddle with her new little niece.

Cassidy parked, hopped out of her truck, then paused to stretch her back and her arms. One thing about older trucks—they sure weren't built for comfort. Still, she patted the hood affectionately before heading toward the cafe.

A hand-painted sign hung over the door, and two wooden benches promised a place to sit in the sun and enjoy your coffee once you'd placed your order.

Inside she was welcomed by the scent of freshly ground coffee beans and the luscious aromas of butter, sugar and cinnamon. She'd come during a lull and the place was quiet. Two older women sat at one of the two booths, engrossed in conversation. Behind the counter, Laurel was softly singing a silly song about hedgehogs. She had her back to the door, busy with dishes, but she spotted Cassidy's reflection in a carefully positioned mirror and broke into a big smile.

"Cassidy! You're home!" Laurel stopped to scoop up her two-month-old daughter from the playpen. "Look who's here, Steph. It's your auntie Cassidy."

Cassidy was already holding out her arms for the bundle. "I hope she isn't making shy yet."

"Oh, she's still too young for that. Besides, she's getting used to new faces. We just got back to work last week and I swear our business has tripled. It seems everyone in the area is finding an excuse to drop in for a coffee and to say hello to the newest Lambert."

Cassidy listened to all of this with a smile, at the same time noticing how happy her sister-in-law appeared. Pretty, too. Her long red hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but it seemed thicker and glossier than ever. And her fair skin was literally glowing.

Laurel deposited a kiss on Cassidy's cheek as she handed over her daughter, who had gained several pounds since Cassidy had seen her last.

"Oh, you're so cute! Look—she has Corb's dimple."

"I know. Isn't it adorable? And only on the left cheek, just like her dad."

Cassidy sighed as Stephanie cuddled in, soaking up the smooches that her aunt couldn't resist planting on her downy soft head. Her wispy hair was coming in orange. And curly.

"How are you doing, precious? Do you like working with your mommy in the cafe?"

The baby looked up at the sound of Cassidy's voice, and Cassidy was amused to see that she had the Lambert green eyes, as well. Stephanie was staring at her intently, and only when she raised her little hand, awkwardly reaching up, did Cassidy realize she was entranced by the sunglasses that were still resting on her head.

"She's just started noticing her hands a few weeks ago," Laurel commented. "Sometimes she stares at them for minutes at a time. It's so cute. But here I am, talking endlessly about my wonderful baby, again." Laurel rolled her eyes. "What's new with you? How were your final exams?"

"They went well, I think. I won't have my marks for a few weeks."

"Can I get you a coffee and a cinnamon bun for the road?"

Hearing the door open behind her, Cassidy moved out of the way so the newcomer could enter. "You read my mind, thanks."

"Make that a double order, Winnie," said a deep voice behind her. "And leave some space for cream in the coffee."

Cassidy *knew* that voice. Slowly she turned, holding Stephanie like a shield between her and the tall, broad-shouldered man who'd just entered the cafe.

Sure enough, there stood Dan Farley. The local vet had some Native American blood, which accounted for his high cheekbones, jet-black hair and dark, almond-shaped eyes. Though he'd spoken to Winnie, it was Cas-sidy he was looking at, with cool dislike.

"Hey, Farley." Darn her voice for coming out so soft and weak. She lifted her chin. "How are things?"

"Busy."

He knew she'd been going to college in Bozeman, and must have noticed the suitcases and boxes in the back of her truck, but he didn't ask about her studies or show any interest in whether or not she was moving back to Coffee Creek. Stepping past her as if she were nothing more than an inanimate obstacle, he made his way to the counter, where he pulled out his wallet.

Heck and darn, but the man had a way about him. Cassidy glanced at the two women at the back to see if they felt it, too. Sure enough they both had their eyes on Coffee Creek's sexy vet. One of them pretended to fan her face with her hand. The other laughed and winked at Cassidy.

Cassidy didn't wink back.

He wasn't *that* good-looking.

She gave him another glance, seeing only his profile and long, muscular build.

Okay, maybe he *was* that good-looking.

Still, he probably hated her and she had only herself to blame.

Winnie set two coffees in to-go cups on the counter, then bagged them each one of the homemade cinnamon buns baked fresh every day by ex-bronc rider Vince Butterfield. A veteran of the rodeo circuit and a member of the Cowboy Hall of Fame, Vince had licked a lifelong dependence on alcohol and in his sixties had begun a new career as a baker. His mother's old recipe for melt-in-your-mouth sticky buns, thickly topped with frosting, was his new claim to fame.

Five minutes ago, Cassidy had been craving one of them desperately. Now her stomach churned at the thought. What were the chances that she and Farley would happen into the cafe at the same time? Pretty darn slim. So slim, in fact, that she hadn't run across him here once in the past four years.

Other than at the church last July, she hadn't seen him anywhere else, either.

If he was called out to the ranch when she happened to be home, she always made herself scarce. She'd avoided him at the funeral. If his name came up in conversation with her brothers, she tried not to listen.

And now here he stood, just a few feet away. Making it very hard not to remember. But no. She would not

think back to that night. She couldn't bear it.

"So where are you off to now, Farley?" Laurel asked, her tone friendly. Everyone in the Coffee Creek area called the vet by his last name. Probably to avoid confusion with his father, also named Dan, whom he'd worked with before the elder Farley and his wife had retired to Arizona.

Farley glanced briefly at Cassidy again, before answering. "Coffee Creek Ranch."

Though there were plenty of reasons why the vet might have been called out to her family's ranch, Cassidy's first thought was for Sky. At fourteen years of age, every day was a blessing. "What's wrong?"

"Your mother's young palomino is sick. Sounds serious."

"Lucky Lucy? Oh, no." She was glad Sky was okay, but this news was almost as bad. Her mother had bought the beautiful three-year-old palomino just this year and Cassidy loved her. Lucy had a wild heart but a gentle soul. Though she was her mother's horse, Cassidy had felt a special connection with the mare from the first time she'd ridden her.

"Any idea what the problem is?"

"From the symptoms Jackson described, sounds like strangles."

"Really?" In all of her twenty-five years they'd never had a case of strangles on the ranch. She didn't even know that much about it, other than it was a highly contagious, serious infection of the nose and lymph nodes.

"I'll have to examine the horse and run some tests to be sure." He added a generous amount of cream to his coffee, fitted the cup with a lid, then grabbed one of the bagged cinnamon buns. "See you later, Laurel. And thanks."

No word to Cassidy, whose ranch he was heading for.

She might as well be an empty bar stool for all the attention he'd paid to her. Wordless herself, she watched as a half-dozen long strides took him out the door.

The cafe fell silent then, and Cassidy realized that Laurel was looking at her, eyebrows raised.

"What's up with you and the vet?"

Cassidy shifted Stephanie to her other arm. She'd planned on staying for a while to visit, but the bad news about the ranch had her suddenly anxious to get moving again.

"Why do you ask?"

"Are you kidding? Sparks were flying here, and they weren't the good kind. Farley isn't the chattiest of people, but I've never seen him be downright rude before. And the way he all but ignored you? That was rude."

Yes. It sure had been.

"I guess he figures he has his reasons." Cassidy went around the counter to deliver Stephanie back to her playpen. She didn't seem very happy about being set down until her mother wound up a musical mobile that had been affixed to the side of the playpen.

"How do you get any work done with such a cute distraction around?" Cassidy bent to give her niece one last kiss.

"It's taken some adjusting, by me and the staff. Eugenia and Dawn have been great. And even Vince has taken a few turns at rocking Stephanie when she's being fussy."

"That I'd like to see." Vince was the epitome of the tough, silent cowboy from another era.

"I know. Isn't it amazing what babies bring out in a person?"

"It sure is." Though Farley hadn't seemed moved by the baby at all. Of course, if she hadn't happened to be there, he probably would have been much friendlier to Laurel and her daughter. "Is there anything I can do to help you before I leave?"

"We're fine," Laurel assured her. "Eugenia's shift is starting in about half an hour. That'll give me a chance to take Stephanie upstairs, feed her and put her down for her nap. She's a great sleeper, thank goodness. Gives me a couple free hours every afternoon."

"Sounds like a good system." Cassidy counted out money for her order, then picked up her drink and her pastry. Now that Farley was gone, her appetite was returning. "I'd better get going."

"Wait one minute. You're really not going to give me the scoop on you and Farley?"

"Nope." Cassidy gave Laurel a warm hug. "I'll be back to have a longer visit in a few days. Or I may drop in on you and Corb at the ranch one evening."

"I'll look forward to it. But be warned. Next time I see you, you better be ready to tell me what's going on with you and the vet. He's considered the most eligible bachelor in town, you know."

Cassidy wasn't surprised. The guy had *presence*. And those eyes...

"The single women of Coffee Creek needn't worry," she assured Laurel. "I'm not going to be any competition where Dan Farley is concerned."

She was out the door before Laurel had time for a comeback. Not that it mattered. She was so *not* going to tell Laurel about the history between her and Farley. She'd never told *anyone* and she'd bet Farley hadn't, either.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Angel Garcia:

Now a day folks who Living in the era where everything reachable by connect to the internet and the resources inside it can be true or not call for people to be aware of each facts they get. How a lot more to be

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Ryan Connors:

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Trina Durham:

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