

# **Solstice Magic**

## **(A Calgary Stampede Adventure, #1)**

**by Jean Stringam**

**[Sample Chapter]                      One**

*June 21<sup>st</sup>, the summer solstice at a small rodeo in southern Alberta*

Vince Lapin wiped the dirt out of his eyes with his red bandana. Where was that bull? Yeah, the fence was open and the bull was trotting through it, two men on horseback at a judicious distance behind.

He'd stuck his ride, so there'd be a little money waiting for him at the end of the day. Not that money was what being a rodeo contestant was all about. Money was more or less a conundrum he had to work out. Vince would still have ridden the bulls. In fact, he'd have ridden every bull in North America if he'd had the time, but the solstice never came early enough to pick up any U.S. circuits, much less give him time to drop down to Mexico.

Vince thought about the bulls in Mexico, wondered about the bulls in Spain, curious to figure out how to alter his solstice landing so that he wouldn't have to waste any of his precious time on travel. Was there any way to control his trajectory? Did his will have any influence on where he ended up? It sure didn't seem like it, but he wished with all his soul he could determine at least this in his life.

Vince looked around at the cowboys hanging on the fences like a straggle of cats. There weren't too many laughing faces in the group. Leave that to the spectators. This was serious

business. These men wanted to make it to the big time. And for a Canadian cowboy—and a whole lot of European, South American, and U.S. cowboys, as well—the Calgary Stampede was it.

Time was everything to these men. The eight-second ride, of course. Those precious eight seconds that determined success or failure. Bonanza or bust. Sometimes even life and death. And every one of them knew the window of time was very narrow in which their bodies could endure the extreme sport of rodeo.

This was Vince's first day back. And part of the First Day tradition was always the mystery of how Cleo knew where to collect him. He loved that about her, and he hated it, too. She'd shown up for how many years now? He couldn't count the years before the Calgary Stampede. Half of that was dumb luck or stupidity, or both. Really, he had to limit it to the years since Grant Rollin had appeared at Cleo's side. Grant Rollin, formerly the unofficial cheerleader for the stampede and CEO of Upstart Oil, had now become a member of the governing board, and no man had ever been more pleased with the position.

Vince nodded at a contestant he'd seen ride well last year, Timberson, from some big ranch in the interior of British Columbia. The man came over and they talked about the quality roughstock this local rodeo had been able to round up. Pretty good, actually. Then a bull-rider from Wyoming joined them and the three men had to admit there'd been some darn fine animal athletes coming through the chutes. A couple of other contestants joined in the talk, but the big worry for the cowboys this year was the changes happening in Calgary.

Vince knew well how it had begun, but there was no need to mention it. A couple of years ago, Grant Rollin had followed up on an anonymous suggestion. Some rodeo aficionado had sent him some random comments about how to infuse more drama into the Greatest Outdoor

Show on Earth. The complaint was that the events were too slick. Since the cowboys were world class, the margin of error had become minimal. That did not make for good theatre. Spectators wanted to gasp and be scared. They wanted to laugh and forget their troubles. Solution? Hire some old-time clowns that would tease the bulls at the same time they were saving the cowboys' lives. Old-fashioned clowning would entertain the audience and infuse new life into a timeless sport.

When Grant Rollin enthusiastically presented the idea to the Board, some members of the Board claimed the change would produce all kinds of random events and cause the Calgary Stampede to lose status. Others said that old-time clowning was nothing but outdated slapstick that wouldn't amuse anybody. But Grant Rollin wasn't about to be outvoted without some data. He hadn't taken Upstart Oil through some tight markets when push came to shove in the Middle East without learning how to assemble weight behind his point of view. No way was Grant Rollin about to back down on the Old-time Rodeo Clown project until he had some facts.

The first round of auditions was held at a little podunk rodeo in central Alberta, where a rather round clown by the name of Mickey showed up. He was a farm boy who knew bulls and had a healthy respect for all their lethal intentions. But he also had a sense of humor that sent Grant Rollins laughing until the CEO's cheeks were ready to split. Mr. Rollin had provided a crew to film the auditions, and when the Board saw the clip a few days later, it silenced, if not convinced, all objectors. Auditions for Old-time Rodeo Clowns began in earnest.

The cowboys gathering around Vince at today's small-town rodeo in southern Alberta were all guessing which of the Old-time Rodeo Clown contestants would make the final cut. Each cowboy had picked out a favorite. After all, it was his butt these clowns were supposed to know how to save. And the grandstand was packed with spectators championing one clown or

another. Consequently, today's rodeo officials had allowed far more bull-riders than usual so that every clown contestant would have a chance to show his stuff.

Vince saw movement near the judge's stand and recognized two familiar figures. Cleo, tall and elegant, was greeting the local dignitaries alongside her foster father, Grant Rollin, shorter by a head, but twice as pleasant. Vince's thoughts reverted back to the enigma surrounding his First Day arrivals. How much will, if any, could he exercise as to the solstice event? Logically, self-determination couldn't be ruled out as a factor. But were there random elements that could change everything no matter what he did? Vince had seen how Mr. Rollin assembled data, but Vince's winter hiatus allowed him no opportunity for any kind of field study, and his summertime rodeo gigs allowed him even less.

At any rate, Vince resolved, he would navigate another Calgary Stampede season without even a shadow of tension with Cleo. No more quarrels. Not this year. Not next year. Not ever. It wasn't a matter of winning or losing. It was more a matter of how to spend the little time he had between the solstice and the end of the Calgary Stampede. Quarreling seemed an absurd alternative for a man with his skill, albeit one that was highly uncharacteristic of a cowboy. Well, he'd better use his talent. Starting now. Vince began the kind of murmured admiration he knew from years of experience that Cleo loved. *Freely through scarlet-filled air of vermillion, quince cut in thunder through sound and the scent and the sight of the dews of lobelia.*

Normally he would have repeated the line three times, but he stopped abruptly when he realized his error. For the next thirty seconds he hoped wildly that Cleo didn't happen to know the contra-indications of lobelia plant chemistry, and broke out in a profound sweat. The lobelia, while beautiful, was sometimes called puke weed (for obvious reasons) and Cleo would not be pleased with the parallels the metaphor suggested. Her knowledge of botany was extensive,

partly because of her family background, and partly because her past mistakes—all at Vince’s expense—had forced her to rapidly acquire expertise on the world’s plant kingdom.

*There was never time to think these things through in advance,* Vince grumbled, justifying himself. *After all, it was the sound of it that seemed to soften Cleo, not the sense of it.* Then his true situation dawned on him. Cleo and Grant hadn’t progressed past the stand where the local dignitaries were grouped. She had heard nothing. He was utterly safe. The color rose up Vince’s neck and he muttered, *I must be out of practice.*

The rodeo announcer’s voice reverberated across the arena, “Here we are folks, the last bull and rider of the day. Lon Wexel riding for Wexel Ranches, from Granum, Alberta. He’ll be riding Wild Eye Clout out of chute number four. Our Old-time Rodeo Clown is contestant number . . . uh . . . is number . . . And here they come!”

The cowboys on the ground scrambled up the fences to safety as the bull and rider in chute number four burst into the arena. Wild Eye Clout had seen a stampede or two and knew where to place his weight in order to snap the man on his back off his perch. The cowboy was young and agile, but the bull had him on experience. Two seconds to go, Lon Wexel hit the dirt, scrubbing his face into it and sending his brand new Stetson flying under the bull’s hooves.

Wild Eye Clout knew how to hook into a cowboy with a mighty twist of his head followed by a swing of his rear-end. Done it every year. But he’d never had such a good chance to trample a cowboy hat before, and there was one directly underfoot. The hat snagged his attention a second or two longer than he should have given it, and when he returned his focus to business, a barrel was spinning straight at him. No doubt about what a ton of bull can do to a barrel! Wild Eye Clout put his all into the hook he should have served the cowboy.

In the midst of the roaring of voices from the spectators in the grandstand, a sound so huge Old-time Rodeo Clown contestant #33 could hardly comprehend it, the Brahma bull snorted and charged. He hooked his horns under the barrel and tossed it through the air.

Inside the barrel Old-time Rodeo Clown contestant #33 braced herself against the padding. With all her strength she pressed her arms and knees against the sides of the barrel so as to stay inside while airborne. Instinctively she knew that if she flew out, nothing could save her. Her world went silent for a moment.

*Smack!* The barrel came down hard. At first the impact stunned her. She struggled for breath. Then she righted herself and popped her head out of the barrel just to eye level. The terrified silence in the grandstands erupted into screams. The bull was facing away from her this time. She saw past him toward a row of humans hanging on fence tops just like the cats on her farm back home.

Then Contestant #33 saw what the bull was looking at. A human lay flat on his stomach in the middle of the arena, face down in the dirt with arms and legs spread, motionless. The beast had him in his sights. Even if the man popped up good as new and made a run for it that very instant, Contestant #33 could see he didn't have a chance of making it to the fence top.

Slowly, groaning, the man on the ground rolled onto an arm, trying to take in the Brahma bull's position. Wrong thing to do. Immediately, the bull took offence and charged.

But Contestant #33 was there before the bull reached the man, pulled the cowboy up against her, and twisted to the side just as the bull's horn snagged past them. The man was too heavy to carry any distance, but Contestant #33 knew she could balance him at her side as she twisted and turned, evading the bull's charges. She also sensed she could keep it up for a lot longer than the bull would care to expend that much energy.

The audience had gasped the first time because the margin of error had been so slight. But when the bull charged again and Contestant #33 stepped to the side at the last minute, holding the semi-conscious cowboy against her like a matador holds a red cape, the spectators cheered. The bull charged again. Again. Again. And the spectators roared their encouragement.

The gate to the holding pens beckoned him, but the bull ignored it, stamping and snorting at the men on the fence. Behind the bull, three pick-up men on horseback blocked the area as medics ran forward with a stretcher to whisk the injured cowboy off into a waiting ambulance. The Brahma bull intended to tour the arena on one final victory lap, but when he turned around he stared straight into the eyes of contestant #33, nowhere near a barrel.

Immediately, the grandstand erupted into screams of “Run! Run! Run!”

Contestant #33 had not waited for this advice. She was running for the white board fence for all she was worth. Scrambling to the top, she clung there, shaking with fear.

The bull had the choice of ploughing into the fence or pulling out of the charge. The afternoon breezes over prairie grass tempted him and he braked with all four legs stiff and straight, flung his head away from the oncoming fence, swatted his tail across his back, and strutted toward the open gate. After a few more minutes the crowd stopped shouting.

Vince studied the small clown beside him on the fence. He hadn't seen a clown perform like that, ever. There was only one way it would have been possible. He listened as the clown's heartbeat slowed, and made his guess. He murmured low in his throat, *Swiftly running winds of eternity flowing into lovely zephyr of summer blossoms.*

Contestant #33 immediately turned toward him. “What?”

Vince had his answer.