

# 3



O.D. removed his hat, knelt in the dust, folding his hands in front of him. A small rivulet of sweat rolled down his forehead to the top of his nose. Two, three, stand up. After all, the calf had been the victor this time, so the crowd didn't expect him to point to his Maker to give kudos. It was more than a little embarrassing when his energetic prey wriggled away. But there was a science to getting the little critters wrapped and tied just right. You couldn't ask for a perfect storm every time.

"Well, folks, that was a slippery calf. Junior, you didn't rub him down with lard, did you?" Smiley Caldwell was in rare form again.

"Oh, Daddy. You know I don't do things like that." Junior popped up from his utterly unnecessary barrel. "Especially not to my good friend, O.D. Billings!"

O.D. clicked his tongue, using the special signal his horse responded to, leading him to the exit gate. Next ride would be better. He spotted John K. talking to Dad at the end of the ramp. Dad wore a relaxed look that O.D. hadn't seen in more

than a year. The results of O.D.'s calf-roping attempts didn't seem to be on his mind at all.

Mom had been preparing all week for tonight's "back from deployment" party. Even then, no one would notice the middle, shorter sibling. Just a lowly calf roper. Nothing flashy, like younger brother Cody's upcoming bull ride promised to be.

Tara Williams, his old high school chum now a local television reporter, strode up with her cameraman in tow. "Hey, O.D. can we have a word?"

"Sure." He settled his feet in the dust, checked with the cameraman to see where he should focus his eyes.

"Hi folks, it's Tara Williams out here at the Caldwell Family Rodeo. We've got our favorite calf roper, O.D. Billings, who had a not-so-great ride tonight. So, your fans want to know something. What about your name? What does O.D. stand for?" She poked the mic at him.

Mom waved at O.D., but his eyes bypassed her to the cowgirl standing behind. Had Hope been watching his ride? She stared his way right now, anyway.

Better answer Tara's question. "Well, Tara. I'm obviously disappointed tonight. I let that one get away."

"Obviously Disappointed." Tara laughed, "Well. That's an unusual name, for sure. Thanks. And better luck next time." She signaled to the cameraman before they hurried off.

"Clever." Mom spoke up as she approached him. "Should we start calling you Obviously Disappointed instead of Orville Dewayne?"

"Huh?" Oh no. What had Tara asked him? "I thought she said. 'How are you feeling?' Maybe we can reshoot that." Tara's blonde hair bobbed under her cowboy hat as she ran toward the group of bull riders. And Hope was gone too.

"That's my boy. Charming and witty without even trying. I

am so glad to have all three of my sons back together tonight.” Mom took his arm to grin at him from eye level. O.D. wished once more that his mom had to look up at him. Oh well, that’s the hand he’d been dealt—no profit in wishing to be taller.

“Hey, Squirt.” Only John K. could get away with calling him that. “Ready to go grab some arena food? Are they still loading the nachos with jalapeños?”

“Probably, but there’s also a food truck outside with some barbecue. If we go now, we might get ahead of the line.” O.D. didn’t have to think this one over. He was famished.

“Where’s the Marshall?” John K. draped his arm around his mom’s shoulders.

“Right here!” Cody ran up from somewhere to their right. “But you know I never eat anything before my bull ride. If I do—”

“Whoa, whoa. Spare us the gory details.” John K. laughed. “You’ve got time to walk out to the midway for a minute, right? We’ll be back before the barrel racing is over.”

O.D. followed the crew through the open barn door of the arena, waving his arm band at the usher who stood there. His brothers were in a great mood. Dad lit up like he must have when each of them was born. Bursting with pride, ready to pass out cigars at the return of the hero soldier. O.D. had stopped trying to make his dad smile like that.

“Come on, Marshall Cody. You can watch while I eat.” Dad tousled Cody’s hair, pulled him up to the front of the group.

John K. kissed the top of their mom’s head, lagging back next to O.D.

“Hey, did y’all hear?” Dad stopped as he passed the ticket booth. “John K. is going to be the new general manager of the dealership when Harold retires next month. The Billings Boys ride again!”

“Hey, great! Way to go, John K.!” Cody high-fived his oldest

brother, then hugged his mom. He linked arms with both parents. They were off again.

“Not happening.” John K. leaned in close to O.D.’s ear while waving at the three in front.

“What?” O.D. stopped, grabbing his brother’s arm.

“I don’t plan to be the general manager of anything right now. Save me, little bro!” He slapped O.D.’s back, then ran to catch up with the group.

O.D. trudged toward the food trucks. John K. didn’t intend to help their dad at the truck dealership? He shook his head with disbelief. That was all Dad had talked about for eighteen months. *When John K. gets home, we’ll do this. When John K. gets home, we’ll try that.* Always ‘when,’ never ‘if.’ John K. bugging out on their dad would kill him.

O.D. tried to ignore the buzz John K. created outside the food trucks as the whole community recognized him.

“He was missing in action for a couple of months.”

“He’s so handsome. And that little brother of his. Wow. What a bull-rider.”

Just once, O.D. wanted to overhear something about the middle brother, the calf roper.

“Hey, O.D.,” Dad called at him from the lemonade line. “If you’re standing in line for nachos, get me some with extra peppers. I’ll buy you a lemonade.”

Well, what do you know? Sometimes, Dave Billings did remember there were three sons in the family.

“Sure.” He peeked back to see Cody holding court with a gaggle of giggling girls.

When he reached the spot John K. found at the picnic table, he traded Dad his nachos for the offered lemonade. Might as well settle in for a minute.

The family chattered as they ate until Cody reminded them that he needed to get back to check on his bull before his

upcoming ride. O.D. ferried their empty containers to the trash can and moved to the rear of the line again as they returned to the arena.

He stopped just before his parents headed up to the grandstand, spotting a familiar honey-brown braid peeking out from a well-worn baseball cap turned backward.

“Go, go, go!” O.D. was surprised at the volume that came out of Hope’s mouth when she encouraged her sister. He moved up to stand near the rail next to her.

Faith and Belle moved as one, leaning oh-so-close to the first barrel, staying upright just long enough to pick up speed on the way to the second, followed by the third. As they turned the final corner to head back, he marveled again at the graceful strength of the oldest Caldwell girl. She was such a natural at this sport.

“She did great.” He smiled at Hope, who was checking the time displayed in the center of the arena.

“Yeah. But she came close to knocking that last barrel over. There is such a thing as overconfidence.” Hope stood back from the railing to turn toward him.

The last barrel racer swooshed past them. Wow, those girls were fast. But not fast enough. Faith’s score would hold. She would be the winner once again.

“Well, I’d better go check on my brother. He drew a mean bull tonight.” He touched her shoulder.

“I’ll be praying. That’s what I always do during the bull riding. I figure it’s just a matter of time before Cody talks Junior into starting that too.” Hope’s eyes focused on her younger brother clowning between events.

“Thanks for the prayers. I hope y’all will drop by tonight. Mom has quite a shindig planned for John K.” A strange man stood over the bull pens. His brand-new ten-gallon hat and newly pressed shirt stuck out at the little family rodeo.

“We’ll be there. But we may not stay long.” Hope spoke over her shoulder as she walked away.

“Come on, Little Dee. Cody’s riding first.” John K. nudged O.D. before he hurried toward the gates where snorting bulls waited to be led to the loading chutes.

“First? Oh great. Well, best to get it over with.” O.D. ran along behind. Any chance his brother might stop calling him ‘Little Dee’ or ‘Squirt’? Probably not. He arrived at the chute just in time to hear Mr. Caldwell’s lead-in intro.

“Ladies and gentlemen, now it’s time for the most-anticipated event of the evening. The young men you’re about to watch have been practicing, watching, analyzing for most of their young lives. But nothing can ever prepare them for this little eight-second ride.”

The crowd whispered to each other. A low rumble began as the music grew louder. Cowboys with prodding sticks guided the bulls into the chutes, where young men with either cowboy hats or helmets climbed the metal gates to prepare for their turn to mount the huge animals. Some joked with the other cowboys, some kept their eyes glued to the bulls, trying to get an idea of how they would move when the gates burst open.

“Hey, Dee. Over here.” Cody perched on top of a chute, adjusting his riding glove. “I’ve got Kemosabi tonight.”

“Great. You know he hasn’t been ridden this season.” O.D. tried not to sound nervous, but he once more wished his little brother had taken up a different sport, like lacrosse, or better yet, chess.

He perched on top of a metal gate. The mixture of manure, hay, and sweat filled his nostrils. His leg muscles tightened as the gate rocked with each bump from the angry creature that filled up most of the narrow space below them.

“Looks like a good tight wrap.” John K. nodded at Cody as he settled in on the massive animal.

“Okay, ladies and gents.” Smiley Caldwell’s voice blared through the speakers. “Here is our first contestant, the youngest of the Billings Boys. Cody has some big boots to fill, with the family’s favorite soldier returning tonight and calf-roping brother O.D. cheering him on. I think you’ll see he’s up to the challenge.”

The crowd cheered. O.D. allowed John K. to do the last-minute reassuring. Cody visibly relaxed. His baby brother glanced O.D.’s way before nodding to the judge.

“Here comes Cody on Kemosabi!” The raucous rock music exploded as the gate opened. The lumbering giant barreled out.

John K. slapped O.D.’s arm. “He looks great!”

O.D. never could talk while Cody was riding. He stared as the hulking black bull jumped to the left, began to circle, then abruptly turned right.

That sudden unplanned move unseated Cody. He hadn’t even made it to three seconds before he hit the ground hard, flat on his back. He stayed down only milliseconds, yet it seemed like hours to O.D. When he finally popped up, O.D. released the breath he had been holding.

Junior Caldwell with Shorty, the veteran bull-fighter, waved in the bull’s face, allowing Cody to scramble to the safety of the metal stock pen next to the chute.

O.D. glanced toward his family’s usual seats to glimpse the relief in their faces. One more bullet dodged. Of course, he wished Cody could have stayed aboard for the full eight seconds but making it out in one piece was a victory in itself.

“Well, horse hockey.” John K. jumped down behind the gate after the bull ran out. “I thought he could ride better than that.”

Cody stalked out of the arena with John K. on his heels.

O.D. started to follow but spied Hope talking to Faith under the stairway. He meandered closer.

“But can he do that?” Faith had never been any good at whispering.

“Not without Dad’s buy-in.” Hope nodded in O.D.’s direction. “But who wants to tell Dad his only brother is scheming behind his back?”

“Sounds serious.” O.D. leaned in to listen.

“Have you seen that fancy-dressed dude hanging around?” Hope peered behind her.

“Yeah. I guess it takes all kinds.” O.D. recognized concern in her voice.

“We’ve seen our Uncle Dub talking to him. Think he wants to buy our rodeo.” Hope readjusted her baseball cap. “After losing Mom, that would probably just finish Dad off.”

“Well, I’m sure it can’t happen that easily. If your dad doesn’t want to sell, it won’t happen.” He wished he was confident as he sounded. “We’ll talk more at John K.’s party. I’ll bet there is some way to stop this.”

What right did he have to reassure them? He had enough to worry about with his own family.

“No score for Cody. Hang on tight, y’all. We have another mean bull under another determined cowboy in the chutes.” Smiley was in his element. “You ready, Shorty? Junior?”

“We’re set, boss.” Shorty waved toward the reviewing stand.

“Ready!” Junior popped up out of the barrel in the center of the arena, then ducked back down. The crowd showed their approval with enthusiastic applause.

Yes, this whole experience was worth saving. He would just have to find a way to help the Caldwell sisters put a stop to their uncle’s plans.