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Breathless. That should be a good thing. Like the giddy feeling after a good ride. Or the happy sensation when she'd been surprised on her birthday. But this—this was different. Hope could not take a breath. And breathing would be required to walk across the Crossroads arena tonight.

Why was this hard? Dad led the way, Faith held her hand, and her brother Junior brought up the rear. But one important person was missing, and her absence gripped Hope's stomach, limiting air supply.

Dad took the first steps through the powdery dirt, his boots leaving deep prints in the freshly smoothed surface.

"Come on, Hope." Faith tightened her grip. "Let's go. Mom would want this."

How many times had she heard those words? Of course, Faith was right. Hope had spent all her time making sure things operated just the way Mom would want, ever since her cancer emerged from the shadows to bully its way into their lives.

They rarely walked out to the center of the arena as a

family. Hope remembered when Calvin Junior made his debut here. Dad had carried him that day, since he was not old enough to walk by himself. Other than that, they'd only done this once or twice in the past fifteen years. Faith and Junior were always in the spotlight, while Hope stayed behind the scenes with Mom. Dad called them the wind beneath the rodeo's wings.

Now Mom was gone. The leaves started to fall, the rodeo was in full swing. She could hear the echo of Mom's voice in her head. 'Keep going. One boot in front of the other.'

Overhead lights blinded her. Would Dad ever stop walking? This must be far enough. The crowd gradually stilled, waiting for her Uncle Dub's voice from the announcer's stand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Caldwell Family Rodeo here in beautiful Crossroads, Arkansas. This little group you see before you is certainly a sight for my sore eyes. Since my dear sister-in-law Catherine ended her battle against cancer by declaring Victory in Jesus, we have missed this branch of the Caldwell Rodeo family. Tonight, I turn the announcing duties back over to my capable brother, Calvin 'Smiley' Caldwell."

The crowd erupted, as always, for Dad. Whoops, hollers, applause.

"Thanks, Dub." Dad's voice through his wireless mic was strong, assuming the vigorous tone he always adopted for the rodeo. "We don't want to delay the excitement. You won't believe the quality of the contestants in tonight's festivities. But my family wants to take just a minute to thank each one of you from the bottom of our hearts."

Hope's eyes focused on her dad's face.

He swallowed hard before continuing. "If we've learned one thing, it's that we believe in the power of prayer. Your pleas to the Heavenly Father have girded us up through the

roughest time in our lives. We're back, a little battle-scarred but stronger than ever. We have a new angel watching over us. I can hear her telling us to mount up, to get this show on the road." By the time he finished his speech, he was nearly shouting.

Wild cheers. More whoops, more hollers.

"Do you kids have anything to say?" He moved the mic below his face turning toward them.

Speak? How can you speak when you aren't sure you can breathe? Hope merely shook her head, as did Faith.

Junior brought his own mic. "I agree, Dad. Those prayers have been great. The Caldwell kids are ready to go tonight. And don't forget. In our house abide these three. Faith, Hope, and Junior. And the greatest of these is ..."

The whole crowd helped him finish his familiar jab. "Junior!"

Dad reached for Hope's hand on one side, Faith's on the other. Faith grabbed Junior. Together they sprinted to the entry tunnel. There was no choice but to breathe. Finally, relief. Maybe they could pull off their first night back in the spotlight after all.

Faith darted over to mount Champ in preparation for carrying the flag for the grand entrance. Junior exchanged high fives with several contestants lined up to make their entry.

Dark yet sparkling eyes caught Hope's glance. The brim of an oversized black hat dipped in a subtle nod. She'd never seen O.D. Billings so serious. The moment didn't last, as he met Junior's fist bump, then the two of them exploded into a leaping shoulder smash. That was more like the showoff calf roper.

Hope took her usual spot next to the exit gate, waiting for the moment she would cue the cowboys to walk forward as they were introduced.

Just to her right, at the edge of Hope's peripheral vision, a glint from a well-dressed man's bolo caught her eye. As she motioned to the first cowboy in line, Uncle Dub came down from the announcer's booth to stand next to the stranger. The two shook hands, then walked out of the spotlight. Who was this guy? Her dad would pronounce him a "dignitary." But what was he doing here tonight?

She turned her attention to the old familiar Lee Greenwood song playing over the speakers as the cowboys and cowgirls trudged to their spots in the arena.

Faith nudged Champ's side with her boot as they sped off, the American flag fluttering behind, just as Lee's voice warbled, "And I'll gladly stand up ... next to you." The crowd was on their feet, responding with enthusiasm.

A bitter lump worked its way up Hope's throat. Her excitement tinged with a new dread. Life was fragile, so short. She refused to look up toward the announcer's stand because she would not see her Mom leaning over the rail. Bowing her head, she added her petition to the opening prayer her dad led. *Please, God, protect everyone here. Hold our family up for the next few hours. We need You more than ever.*

The crowd intoned "Amen" in unison. She caught a glimpse of O.D. Billings's piercing eyes again. Had he even bowed his head for the prayer? She nodded in his direction when he tipped his hat before leading the procession of riders back to the ramp. Not a famous hero like his older brother, or a daring bull-rider like the youngest, O.D. was by far the most interesting, at least to Hope. But he had only ever thought of her as the skinny little neighbor girl.

Heading for the stairway to the announcer's platform, Hope eyed the same stranger standing with her uncle Dub near the rodeo office. A group of bull riders crossed between them, so she stopped at the foot of the stairs, listening.

“Yeah, I’m glad you’re here. My wife and I are more than ready to talk about your offer. But we’ll have to wait a day or two to talk to my brother. Emotions are still raw. He doesn’t need to hear about any big changes tonight.”

Hope couldn’t understand what Uncle Dub said after that.

“Sure, I get it,” the dignitary patted Uncle Dub’s shoulder. “I’ll just enjoy the show. Call me. But don’t wait too long. Our board will decide soon. I think the Caldwell rodeo would be a great fit for our corporation.”

Hope caught her breath. She held her hand over her mouth as she scrambled up the wooden stairs. Had Uncle Dub seen her listening to their conversation? Was he really thinking of trying to sell the family business? What timing. Had he been waiting for her mom to die? This wouldn’t have happened before the cancer diagnosis. Wow.

As she reached the top of the stairs, Dad announced the first event of the night. His voice sounded so familiar. Almost normal. She half expected to see her mom at his right elbow, ready to hand him notes or pour another glass of water to keep his throat fresh.

Hope pulled out the folding chair next to her dad, as Mom told her to do. ‘Just stay close. Make sure he has everything he needs,’ she’d said. ‘The best thing that can happen during any rodeo is for nothing unexpected to happen. You will have done your part if no one knows you are there.’ Dad turned her way, winked, then focused back on the arena just as she glimpsed the little tear running down his cheek.

The first event of the night went smoothly, as the youngest participants took their ponies through their paces, dodging poles. Junior’s banter with Dad filled in the time when poles needed to be reset, or a timid pony balked in the entryway.

Hope spied a question mark her dad had written at the top of the list of calf ropers who would come up next. Her cue to go

back downstairs to confirm that the contestants stood at the ready. Patting him on the shoulder, she hurried down the stairs, only touching the banister when she turned the corner at the bottom.

When Mom had been here, Hope hadn't been in the announcer's stand much. She'd mostly stayed at the bottom of the stairs, making sure everyone was in line, waiting for instructions from Mom. 'Hope, run grab me another cup of coffee for your dad.' 'Find out a little about this new bull rider. Who are his parents? Where does he go to school? Something.'

Hope scampered towards the entryway tunnel with her clipboard. Just outside, an informal line of cowboys with horses waited to enter the arena. She talked to each man in turn, checking their name off the list, then giving them a number to indicate the order of their ride.

"O.D. Billings." He pointed at his name on the list. "Number three."

"Yes. Thanks." She smiled. As if he needed to tell her his name.

O.D. pointed at her list again, then gestured with his left thumb to the guy standing next to him. "Jose Ramirez. Four."

She couldn't restrain another smile. "Thanks." She nodded. He nodded back. How could eyes that dark have such a sparkle to them?

Hope made a point not to look O.D.'s way as she walked back to the stairway.

Mom had always tried to tell Hope that there was satisfaction in being behind the scenes. But O.D. didn't seem to be happy with that role. He spent so much time drawing attention to himself with his antics in the arena that Hope doubted anyone comprehended his true character.

Once, Hope imagined O.D. might become more than a next-door neighbor. Dad had invited the Billingses over for one

of his famous cook-outs. O.D. had spent a lot of time helping her bring things out from the kitchen. Faith even mentioned that Hope's senior prom was coming up soon. She'd never forget what O.D. had said about that.

'Not my style. Getting all gussied-up to prance around pretending to have fun. Give me a bonfire in the back forty with some crazy cowboys. I'm all good.'

Except for the gussied-up part, isn't that what he did after every ride? He was very good at prancing and pretending. And then he'd had the nerve to show up at her prom with someone else. That still made her shake her head in disbelief.

She took the stairs two at a time, placed her list next to her dad's right elbow, with all the cowboys checked off. Dad shook his empty coffee cup in her direction as Junior told a corny joke over his portable mic. She picked up the cup, turning back to the stairway. Maybe this folding chair next to dad wasn't even needed. She certainly didn't see herself sitting in it for long tonight.

She was almost back down to the dirt floor when the toe of her boot caught a splinter on the stairs, lurching her forward. Strong arms caught her before she did a nose-dive.

"Are you okay?" Faith asked from behind the rescuer.

"Yep." Hope managed only a quick response as she pushed back against a flannel shirt that smelled like fabric softener to find herself staring straight into O.D.'s smiling face. Why was he showing up at every turn tonight?

O.D. set her securely on her feet. "See y'all at the house later?" Was that last wink necessary? Maybe not, but it was certainly O.D.

"Sure." Faith waved at him as he ran back to mount his horse.

"Hope, who is that guy over there talking to Uncle Dub?"

She pointed as Hope stole a glance at the over-dressed man from earlier.

“I don’t know,” Hope whispered. “But I think he’s bad news. We’ll talk about him later. I need to get Dad some coffee.” There was no need to upset Faith until after her barrel race.

“O.D. invited us over to their house for a welcome home party for John K.” Faith stood on her tiptoes, looking over a crowd that had gathered at the concession stand. “He always was so great-looking. I wonder where he is?”

Hope followed her glance. She didn’t see John K. Billings either. There would probably be a crowd of fawning girls around him. Faith hadn’t been the only one to have a crush on O.D.’s older brother before he joined the military.

“You and Junior can go on out to the Billingses’. I’ll bring Dad when we get all of tonight’s rodeo business put to bed.” If that wasn’t her mom’s actual voice coming out of Hope’s mouth, she didn’t know what it was.

After waving at the young man counting out change to a customer, she headed back toward the stairs, fresh coffee in tow. She was tempted to see if Uncle Dub was inside the office. What would she do if he was? Should she confront him? She steadied the cup of coffee with both hands. It would be better to just get back up to the announcer’s stand, keep things normal as possible.