



## Chapter Three

Kayla slid into a folding chair next to Cody as the first tie-down contestant broke his barrier. “Hey” Cody sipped his soft drink. “How’s the recently deposed queen?”

“Stop.” She turned toward him, hands on hips. “I won’t be finished with my reign until the end of the year.”

“Aww.” The crowd reacted as the calf jumped free of the lariat looped around its head.

“Well, that one was slippery calf.” The announcer picked up his accustomed patter.

“Just to let you know, I saw the newly selected queen riding behind you during the opening tonight.” Cody leaned close to her. “She’s probably sweet and all, but I’m afraid she doesn’t measure up to last year’s winner.”

“Good thing you weren’t one of the judges. Physical appearance is not the most important thing.” Kayla wagged a finger in front of his face.

“Yeah. I’m not cut out to be a judge. That’s for sure.” He drained the cup and placed it next to his chair on the floor.

“Is O.D. next?” Kayla asked.

“Not sure. I think there may be one more before him. He

and Buck should be in position, getting ready to come into the gate.” Cody pointed toward the entryway.

“There’s Hope and Faith.” Kayla waved at her cousins.

“Hi, Kayla.” Junior stood behind Cody when she turned back around.

“Do I have your seat?” She leaned forward.

“No. Stay seated.” Junior handed Cody a box of popcorn. “I’ll go sit with my rotten sisters. This guy has been looking for you all evening.”

Her cheeks warmed. She resumed her place between Cody and another man sitting in a wheelchair in front of the stands.

“Here they come.” Cody rolled up to the railing.

The black calf busted out of the gate, followed quickly by O.D. and his buckskin. O.D. twirled his lariat overhead once, twice. The loop grew bigger and still bigger, then wrapped around the calf’s neck. O.D. pulled back, tightening the loop, and Buck stepped backward.

“Yeah.” Cody clapped, watching intently as O.D. jumped down, ran to the calf, grabbed its flank, flopped it to the ground, and grabbed a back leg. Collecting two more legs, he tied them together with the smaller rope he held in his teeth. He jumped up, holding his hands in the air.

“Okay, Buck, do your stuff.” Cody gripped the railing in front of him.

The horse moved forward one step to allow some slack in the rope. O.D. mounted easily, watching to be sure the calf stayed tied.

“That’s it.” Cody glanced up at the clock above the announcer’s head. “Eleven point seventy-five. Not half bad.”

“Looks like he enjoys being here.” Kayla loosened the lid of her water bottle.

“O.D. or Buck?” Cody waved at his brother as the judges unwrapped the calf.

“Both!” She’d always liked this event. It demonstrated the teamwork of the cowboy and his horse. Unlike Cody’s event of

bull-riding, where the man and the animal were competing against each other.

Cody took a deep breath and turned toward Kayla again. "Sorry I was sort of pre-occupied. It's a whole different thing when your family's out there."

"Hey, I get it." Kayla nodded. "I've stood next to your brothers when they're watching you." She'd been told O.D. had almost come to blows with the men who held him back when a bull sent Cody flying.

"Family ties. Tighter than any pigging string." He turned to his left as a young man tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey," Cody greeted the lanky cowboy. "You remember Kayla Caldwell? Kayla, this is the bull rider who won the last Thanks for Hanging On prize from the Billings Boys."

"Sure, I remember. You're Junior's cousin, right?" The young man shook Kayla's hand.

"Don't remind me." Kayla pretended to grimace. "Here, you can have my chair."

"No, that's okay. Keep your seat. I can't stay long." The cowboy crouched down on Cody's left side. "Hey, man. I need to ask you something. If it's too personal, I'll understand."

"Sure. Fire away."

"Well, I don't know how to ask this." He cleared his throat. "That night." He paused again. "Did you have a bad feeling before you got on your bull? I am normally not nervous, but I'm kind of spooked for some reason tonight ... and ..."

"You know, I didn't. Everything seemed normal." Cody did not lower his voice, so Kayla didn't feel guilty for overhearing.

"Looking back, though, I may have lost focus. There was a lot going on. I'm not blaming anyone, you understand. I just don't think my mind was completely right." Cody continued. "Listen, man." He leaned forward, looking the cowboy in the eyes. "It's all about you and that bull. Don't think about anything else. You just tell him who's in charge. Communicate through

the pressure of your knees in his sides. Make him move like you want him to move.”

“Yeah.” The young man nodded.

“Just you and that bull. Block everything else out.” Cody patted his shoulder. “You’ll be great.”

“Okay. I appreciate that.” The cowboy rose back to full height. “I’ll head down to get ready, then.” He tipped his hat in Kayla’s direction. “Ma’am.”

Kayla nodded. That awful night had changed Cody’s life forever. He didn’t seem to have any problem talking about it. Could she answer questions about her mom and dad’s crash that confidently? It was hard to think about that day, let alone try to talk about it. Cody’s courage was amazing.

“Ladies and gents, we want to thank you again for being here tonight.” The announcer was filling time before the bronc riding started. “We also want to remind you that tonight’s performance is dedicated to the memory of Dub and Tina Caldwell, huge supporters of our rodeo events here for many years. You met their daughter Kayla earlier. She’s the reigning queen for Rodeo Arkansas Teen. I think she’s still in the arena, so let’s show her some love with another round of applause for the angels watching over all of us tonight. Here’s to you, Miss Kayla Grace.”

The crowd cheered and applauded. If only her hat with its attached tiara didn’t make her so obvious. She blinked back tears, raising her hand in appreciation. Cody faced her and winked. Riding in the grand entry had been so much easier than sitting here right now.

Loud rock music filled the arena as the riders milled around behind the gates.

“We’re ready to get our saddle bronc competition going. Here’s our first rider, Shane Butler, aboard Twister. Encourage this young cowboy, if you please.” A huge cheer rang out as the horse and rider paced behind the metal gate.

The crowd groaned as the cowboy took an early exit from the bucking horse.

“Want to go get something to drink?” Cody backed up and headed toward the exit ramp.

“Sounds good.”

Would Cody want to stay in the lobby until after the bull-riding event was over? She certainly couldn’t blame him. She followed him toward the concession stand.

“I’m not going to miss the bronc riding that much. Watched plenty of it when John K. was competing.” He waited for her at the bottom of the ramp.

“Not as exciting as bull-riding?” She stopped next to him.

“I don’t know. A horse is a horse, you know.” He maneuvered into the end of the line for soda. “They don’t seem as menacing as a snorting, fuming hunk of walking dynamite.”

“Yeah. I would say you prefer the bulls, for sure.” She tried to read the menu above the concession stand.

“Don’t pretend you’re not a thrill seeker yourself.” He pointed at her. “So, here’s your mission, if you choose to accept it. You brave the drink line, I’ll go get some nachos, and we can meet up in time for the barrel races.” He stopped beside her. “Oh, yeah. Do you want anything from the hot dog, pretzel, and nacho booth?”

“No. But what are you drinking?”

“Anything cold and non-alcoholic. You make the call.” He shoved a wad of cash in her hand and rolled to the end of a line that wrapped past the T-shirt booth.

Kayla shifted from one foot to another. She’d spent many nights on the other side of one of these concession counters with her mom. Waiting in line was not her comfort zone. She swallowed hard as the lady serving customers handed a small boy his change. So patient and kind, just like Mom.

Shouts from the arena sent people running to get a glimpse of what was happening inside.

“He’s all right!” The announcer’s voice prompted cheers. “But

that was a nasty fall. Let's give him one more round of applause as he dusts himself off."

The night Cody was almost destroyed by a bull, she'd been peddling popcorn. What struck her that night was the quiet. She had gone about her duties mechanically, taking money, dispensing orders with none of her usual polite banter.

When the cheers had resumed in the arena that night, they had been subdued. Many more whispers than shouts reached her ears. How she had wished to be able to see what was happening on the dusty arena floor. Now, she was grateful she hadn't. Did Cody's family relive that horror every time they attended a rodeo? How could Cody sit through a bull-riding competition tonight?

"Ma'am?" The teen behind the counter broke through her daydream. "What can I get for you?"

She ordered a lemonade. "Make it two."

After paying, she balanced the two cold plastic cups. Cody approached her with a dish of chips covered with chili and cheese in his lap.

'It's just you and the bull.' The advice he offered to his bull-riding buddy echoed in her head. Just concentrate on the task at hand. She realized that's how Cody lived his life. Whether that was watching a bull-riding competition, or just making it back to his seat with a lap full of hot, messy food.

"You ready to go back up?" Cody asked.

"Sure." She followed as folks stepped out of his way. Just carry these two drinks without spilling them. *Just you and the bull.*

Cody imitated Kayla's movements as she watched the barrel races. Lean to the left, then the right while the human-equine team rounded the first two barrels. Sit up straight after they navigated the third one. Clap vigorously and cheer as horse and rider made their final dash.

Looking to her left, she caught him watching on the third run.

“Yeah, I guess I do sort of get into it.” She poked his shoulder.

“Hey, don’t let me interfere. I’m just admiring your technique.” He’d never had this much fun watching a barrel race.

The next rider waited in the entryway. Cody resisted the impulse to reach around her shoulders and pull her closer. How would she take that?

“I’m so glad you are here.” She leaned closer.

“You read my mind. I was thinking the exact same thing. So, who’s going to win this?” *Good job, Cody, let her be the one to move closer.*

“The first girl set the bar pretty high, but they usually save the best for last.” She checked the leader’s score, displayed above the announcer.

“Well, we’d better get ready to help her.” He placed his hands firmly on his thighs, gluing his eyes to the barrel racing team getting ready to compete.

“Are you sure Junior was the clown? Or did you teach him everything he knows?” She laughed.

“*Sbb*. We need to concentrate.” He gritted his teeth and stared straight ahead.

As the last rider’s time was recorded, Kayla raised her fist in victory. Evidently, a family connection was not required for her to find a winner to cheer for.

“Okay, ladies and gents. That concludes the barrel racing for tonight.” The announcer’s voice became deeper, more serious. “Next up, the event everyone’s waiting for. Ten men will battle ten rank bulls in a classic struggle. These athletes have traveled from all over the country to show us what they can do. I know this is why you bought a ticket tonight.”

The crowd applauded and cheered.

“I have it on good authority we have a special guest tonight.” The announcer’s patter continued.

Cody looked up at the digital scoreboard, where a camera panned the crowd.

“A brave young man named Cody Billings completed his eight second ride, earning a very high score at the Caldwell family Rodeo in Crossroads. But that autumn night, the bull was not finished with him.” Cody’s cheeks flamed. Who was this guy? Why did he feel the need to mention Cody’s injury tonight?

“The rodeo family was stunned that night, and we want to let him know we were praying for him every day. We’re so glad to see him here tonight, sitting next to last year’s Rodeo Arkansas Teen queen. Let’s let him hear our support.” The crowd cheered wildly, with Junior Caldwell providing a shrill whistle from a few rows behind him. Yeah, this announcement had his buddy’s fingerprints all over it. He already felt awkward, in this chair, instead of waiting behind the pens. At least he had a beauty queen beside him to deflect some of the crowd’s attention.

He removed his hat, raised his hand, and waved as his face appeared on the huge screen.

“Okay.” He whispered through his teeth. “Let’s get on with the show.”

Somewhere during the third bull ride, Kayla grasped his right hand in her left. His eyes stayed focused on each cowboy. The fourth one actually stayed seated until the eight-second buzzer sounded.

He squeezed Kayla’s hand, as the young man celebrated his victory.

“That was a good one,” he said when the bull was safely behind bars.

The cowboy who had talked to him earlier took an extra second to rewrap the rope before nodding at the gateman. Hopefully, his jitters had passed. *Remember, just you and the bull.* He tried to send a telepathic message to the arena floor.

Five seconds, six, seven. When the youngster reached eight, Cody held his breath. Now, if the bull would just be polite to this cowboy.



“He did it!” Kayla jumped up, clapping. Cody exhaled, nodding when she turned to face him. Had she realized she was holding his hand? Was it all about the tension of the bull ride? No matter. He didn’t regret it one bit.

“Yep. That’s a winner.” He, the cowboy, and the bull had all survived, and Kayla had shared the moment. All in all, this had been a pretty good night.