



SPUR *it* *On*

Falling for the Bull Riders Book # 2

KITTY COX

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FALLING FOR THE BULL RIDERS

BOOK TWO

KITTY COX

SPOTTED HORSE PRODUCTIONS

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POTENTIAL TRIGGER WARNING

Falling For The Bull Riders series contains relationships that are fluid and often complicated. Some MM and polyamorous romances.

Slight bullying and hazing of the main character, violence against women.

DEDICATION

This one is short and sweet - but it's for my Friends - while my circle is very small, each one of you are treasured.

Kitty Cox

AUTHOR NOTE

During the course of planning and writing this series, changes have been made to the Professional Bull Riders (PBR), including to the tour schedule. I couldn't keep up (and didn't want to change the plans already made). In order to allow the story to flow smoothly, some liberties were taken with both the sport of Bull Riding, and the technical details of the circuits available. I tried hard to stay true to the *nature* of the sport - and the *spirit* - but details have been changed to protect the innocent (and guilty) characters.

Any representations of sponsors, riders, cattle, tour dates, and other details included in this series are completely fictional. No harm is intended to any companies that may be portrayed as aspects of modern culture. The toughest sport on dirt isn't about who is paying the bills. It's about cowboying (or girling) up enough to hold on for a full eight. Here's to the athletes, both human and bovines, that keep us entertained.

~Kitty

CHAPTER I



“DID you drop the L-word on him yet?”

The question seemed to come out of nowhere, but I had a feeling it had been brewing for a while. Yesterday, I’d ridden from St. Louis to Lincoln, Nebraska, with Ty. Seven hours together in a truck, and after the crazy weekend we’d had at the last PBR event, a lot of things had been said. Now, J.D. was curious about it - clearly - but there was one little problem with his question.

“It’s been a week,” I pointed out.

“Well, plus a few days,” J.D. clarified, tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel as empty farmland passed by us on both sides. “Besides, you fucked him.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Trying to say you’ve been in love with every guy you’ve slept with?”

The smallest little smile touched J.D.’s lips. “No...”

“Exactly,” I said, nodding my head to make it clear he’d proven my point.

But J.D.’s tongue flicked over his lips, even though his eyes didn’t leave the road. “I was in love with the first few people I slept with. Or at least I thought I was.” Then he glanced over, his dark brown eyes meeting mine. “And I’m pretty sure you haven’t been screwing around as long as I have.”

Yep, I could feel my face heating up. Trying to force my skin to cool off, I wiggled my feet on the dash, tapping my

toes in time with the country music on the radio. I liked this song. I also really didn't want to talk about Ty. Not with J.D. Discussing another guy felt weird since I'd slept in the same room as J.D. last night.

So I tried to change the subject. "I don't think Ty really likes Tanner."

"He's jealous," J.D. told me. "Don't worry, I'm workin' on him."

"Like you're working on me?" I asked.

J.D. smiled, but his eyes were on the road. "Naw. Ain't nothing like I'm workin' on you, Cody." The curl of his lips grew a little bigger for a moment. "But if you aren't in love with Ty, why are you sleeping with him?"

I wanted to groan at how easily he'd brought that back around. Instead, I reached my foot over and tapped his thigh with it. It was the closest I could get to a smack with the console down between us. He chuckled once, then grabbed my ankle, shifting my leg to rest on his. Not really the most comfortable thing, but if I twisted a bit, it almost worked. When I pushed the console up, it was actually better than the dash, so I moved my other leg over as well, giving J.D. my full attention.

"I like Ty," I admitted. "Just like, though. I mean, he's hot."

"Yeah, he is," J.D. agreed, looking over quickly as if checking my reaction to that.

I was smiling. I still wasn't used to the idea of being around guys who liked guys, and this entire situation was so far outside my understanding of relationships, but I liked it. There was also something about J.D. that made me feel like it was ok to just say what I wanted, as if he'd never judge me for my opinions.

"Tanner's cute too," I added.

"Oh yeah," J.D. agreed. "I always thought he'd be a skinny thing, what with the clothes he wears."

I giggled, thinking about the shower we'd all shared. Nope, skinny was *not* how I'd describe that bullfighter. I'd always thought we bull riders were muscular, but it seemed the three crazy guys who kept the bulls off us in the arena were just as built. Tanner's abs had put Ty's to shame. J.D.'s were almost as good. Never mind the biceps, although Ty won in that competition.

"He wants to take you on a date," J.D. said.

That snapped my mind back to the present, and memories of two wet and naked men showering with me dissolved like mist. "Huh?"

"When we get to Cheyenne," J.D. clarified. "Tanner's gonna ask you on a date." He moved his hand to caress my calf. "It's partly because people in the PBR will see you two together. Partly because he wants to get to know you a little better."

"What kind of date?" I asked.

"Does it matter?"

Ok, I hadn't really thought that far ahead. Mostly, it was just that my automatic reaction was to say no to anyone asking me out. That was easiest. Granted, according to my best friend back home, it was also stupid, but my track record with guys was a whole lot of shit. It went from my first kiss - which only happened because the guy had been dared - to my first real boyfriend, who was still trying to run me out of bull riding. After all, girls were supposed to get ridden, he'd told me, not do the riding.

"J.D., I..." The sentence trailed off when I didn't know how to explain any of that.

He just jerked his chin at the long and straight road ahead of us. "We have five more hours before we get to our next home. Means you got plenty of time to think about it. Or talk about it." He pulled in a breath. "But I think you should do it."

"Tanner only wants to go out with me so it looks like he has a girlfriend," I reminded him.

J.D. scoffed. “Cody, you know better than that. He thinks you’re cute. He thinks you’re a good bull rider. He also thinks that since he doesn’t get to talk to you much at the events, he needs to make an effort if he wants a chance. And yes, he wants a chance.”

“Is this just because I’m the only woman on the tour?” I asked. “Seriously, J.D., I know you three have all had prettier women in your bed. I just...” I turned to look out the window, realizing what my dad had meant about too many hours alone with someone and no way to escape. “I’m just the crazy girl who rides bulls, aren’t I?”

“The hot, crazy girl.” Thrusting out his lower lip, he nodded. “Yep, but to us, that’s pretty sexy. I mean, what’s the most important thing in our lives? Bull riding. What do you understand and enjoy just as much? Bull riding. That you’re also really fucking pretty?”

“I’m a tomboy,” I countered. “At best.”

“A hot one.” He was getting a little smirk on his lips.

“I don’t even wear makeup half the time!”

“So?” he asked.

That killed my next argument about my fashion sense, so I decided to double down. “Look, Cole made it clear that he only liked me because I rode bulls too. All my life, the guys have laughed at how I look more like a guy than half the guys I went to school with. I promise I’ve heard it all.”

“The same guys who were scared because you ride better?” he countered.

“I didn’t place better than them,” I admitted. “Well, not always.”

“No one always places at the top,” he assured me.

“Well, yeah,” I grumbled, “but you don’t understand. I mean, Tulsa was the first belt buckle I ever won for myself. Back home, I was always in second place. I just made more second places so I could get enough points to qualify for the Tough Enough series. The guys all had belt buckles, though.”

“Don’t care,” J.D. told me. “Cody, none of that changes that you’re beautiful, ok? And there’s a whole lot of guys out there who think girls can’t ride bulls.”

“But not you or Ty,” I reminded him.

“Not us,” he agreed. “Know why?”

“Why?”

“Because we know how to ride.” His hand made another pass across my leg. “We know half these guys get lucky when they stay on for eight seconds. Maybe a handful of them have any skill. You? You got the skill. You get up on those bulls and ride them like you own ‘em. You get in there and hold on real good.”

“That’s how my daddy taught me.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, but you’re *good*. Ty and I can see it. So can a few others. Not all like it, but that don’t mean they can’t see it. Also don’t mean you aren’t a real pretty girl, Cody. Maybe you’ve got some muscular arms, and if a guy’s dick is real small, that might scare the hell outta him, but I got a big dick.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Wouldn’t know. Looked like a normal dick to me.”

He glanced over at me again. “How many guys you fucked?”

“One,” I mumbled. Then I realized that was a lie. “Two.”

“Cole and Ty.” He murmured under his breath. “So what are your rules?”

“Rules?”

“Yeah, rules,” he repeated. “I mean, everyone’s got rules about who they’ll get in bed with. Ty only sleeps with women. I only sleep with people who get my dick hard. Some people only have sex with the ones they fall in love with. Maybe it’s three dates before you’ll get naked, or maybe it’s only red lipstick. Don’t care, just curious.”

“Um...” I shifted a little more so that my shoulder was against the back of the seat. Then I tucked the seatbelt under my arm. “I used to say I didn’t sleep with bull riders. The problem is I don’t really know anyone else. I mean, all I ever did was the local events or stack hay.”

“And none of those guys working hay with you were interested?” he asked.

I laughed. “Too old and too married,” I assured him.

“Ok, so you need rules,” J.D. decided. “We can say ‘not married’ is one of them. I’m gonna guess men, since I’m pretty sure you aren’t checking out any girls.”

“No girls,” I agreed.

He grunted as if that wasn’t necessarily the right answer, then looked over and grinned. “Welp.” His eyes went back to the road. “I’d say guys with tattoos should be a rule, but you already broke that one with Ty.”

“I’m not making a rule about tattoos,” I groaned.

“But I got tattoos,” he pointed out.

“Trust me, I know.” I used my foot to rub his leg. “Tanner doesn’t.”

“Oh-ho!” He laughed. “So you’re gonna fuck Tanner?”

“We shared a shower the other night, J.D.!”

“Don’t mean you’re gonna fuck him, though,” he pointed out. “I mean, I’m all for it. And when you do, you should tell me all about it. Pretty sure that boy is one of the wild ones in bed, but don’t you worry none. I’ve told him that he’s gotta be a gentleman with you.”

“And what happens if I don’t want a gentleman?” I asked.

“Just the first time,” he assured me. “No choking you on his dick. No butt stuff. No tying you up and spanking you.” He flicked both brows up.

I huffed and tried to pull my legs away, but his hand grabbed my ankle, holding the right one in place.

“Don’t be like that,” he taunted. “I mean, you deserve to have the full experience first, you know. Now, I’m not real sure what you and Ty did, but I’m gonna guess you’ve got the whole missionary thing down. Throwing you against the wall? On the bathroom counter? In the shower? Guy behind you? *Reverse cowgirl*? I mean, you are a bull rider, so I bet you’d be real good at that.”

“J.D.!” I moaned, shoving both hands over my face.

He just kept going. “I like missionary, though. There’s something about seeing their face, ya know? Don’t care if I’m on bottom or top. I also really like oral sex. Getting someone off like that? Man, Cody, it’s the most powerful you’ll ever feel in your life. More than riding a bull for a full eight.”

“Is this your way of saying you like to get blown?” I asked.

For a little too long, he didn’t say anything. Then, I saw him swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Yeah, see, I’m kinda trying to get you to talk to me, and I don’t have no one else I can talk to about this shit, get me? I mean, if I said I suck dicks?” He shook his head.

There was something about that level of honesty that made it easier to open up just a bit more. “I’ve never done it.”

“Really?” he asked.

I just shrugged. “Really. I mean, Cole went down on me, but I don’t get what the big deal is.”

That was enough to make him look over again. “And Ty didn’t?”

“Well, he was gonna, but I kinda pulled him back up.” I scrunched up my face. “I mean, I didn’t wanna miss out.”

“Yeah,” J.D. said softly. “Girl, we’re gonna have to make you bad. I mean, unless you don’t wanna be bad.”

“No,” I assured him, “I wanna be bad. I’m just not any good at it, J.D. I spent my whole life learning how to ride bulls. That’s it. Never had a real date. Never got asked to a school dance. None of it.”

He just nodded his head slowly. “Yeah, we’re gonna have to fix all of that. You got three boyfriends now, Cody. I think that’s a real good start to being bad. Now, step two? That’s going on a date with Tanner.”

“And you?” I asked.

I swore his cheeks turned a little darker, and this time J.D.’s eyes didn’t waver at all from the road. “I’m not so good at dating either,” he admitted. “I figure if Ty and Tanner do all the hard stuff, then I’ll get to see what works.”

“I still don’t know how this is supposed to work,” I admitted. “You, Ty, and Tanner all wanna be my boyfriends? That’s... It’s...”

“Insane?” he teased. “Baby, I dunno how to break it to ya, but that’s what everyone calls me. And you? You’re my rookie. Means I’m gonna teach you everything I know.”

“Like how to suck dick?” I joked.

He just nodded slowly. “Yep, I can do that. Mostly because I think you won’t laugh at me for it.”

“Not laughing,” I promised.

His hand slid over my leg again, softer this time, before pausing in the middle of my calf. “Me either, Cody. I just wanna make sure you know I’m your friend first, ok? No matter what, you and me? We’re gonna stay friends. Even if you fall in love with Ty, or Tanner, or even someone else. We’re still gonna be real good friends, and I’ll still break the face of anyone who tries to chase you off the tour, ok?”

Leaning forward, I reached over to place my hand over his. “Best mentor ever, J.D. Promise, we’re gonna always be friends.”

“Good,” he said. “Then that means when Tanner asks you on a date, you’re gonna say yes, right?”

Letting go, I flopped back. “Fine!”

“That’s like one of those good fines, yeah?”

That smile was taking over my lips again. “Maybe.”

“It will be if you go out with Tanner,” he promised. “And then you can tell me all about it, and maybe I’ll get up the balls to ask him out myself.”

“Promise?” I asked.

J.D. just nodded at the long road ahead of us. “Fuck yeah. If you can do it, then I’ll have to do it better.”

“No way,” I shot back. “I might be the rookie here, but I’m better.”

“Prove it,” he taunted.

And just like that, he’d figured out how to make sure I didn’t back out. Yeah, this was why J.D. and I worked so well together. He pushed me, and I couldn’t help but prove to him that I could handle it all. Plus, the idea of dating the same guy as him? It was kinda hot. Kinda crazy.

In other words, it sounded like exactly the kind of bull rider I wanted to be.

CHAPTER 2



CODY MUST'VE SHAVED her legs last night. Maybe this morning. I wasn't sure when she'd snuck that in, but damn, her legs felt good on me like this. I could feel the muscles in her calf each time I caressed it, and she sure as shit wasn't pulling away. She was, however, blushing, but I wouldn't call her out on it.

Naw, that was cute. This girl was really something else, and the more I got to know her, the more I felt this pull to her. I'd once given Ty shit for trying to be romantic about her, but I got it now. Seeing her all vulnerable and honest like this? Damned if it didn't punch me right in the heart.

"So," I said, feeling my lips curl as I kept my focus on the miles ahead of us, "you and me? We can talk guys, right?" I dared to look over only to find Cody with her head pressed up against the back of the passenger seat. Damn, she was cute. "Because my little sister isn't even sixteen, and she's the only one I got who'll talk about it with me."

Cody giggled. "Isabella?"

"Yup." Ok, it was sweet that she'd remembered my sister's name, even if she pronounced it wrong. Probably from my tattoos, but still. "I'm gonna buy her a car for her birthday. Mama says it can't be a new one, though, because she'd just wreck it, but she's not like that."

"Well..." Cody drawled, "if it's a year old, it's not new, right? But I bet Isabella would think it is."

“It’s Ee-sa-bella,” I told her. “Not Iz-a-bella. We grew up speaking Spanish, you know.”

“Isabella,” she corrected, saying it right this time.

“And now my mama will love ya,” I teased. “But yeah, I like how you think. I figure I’ll get her an SUV, though, so she can have something like a truck, but still haul all her friends around. Or do you think I should go for something else?”

“Is she a cowgirl?”

“Nope.” I laughed. “Naw, my little sister is one of those popular girls. She does cheerleading and shit.”

Cody just jerked her chin at me. “How old are you, J.D.?”

“Twenty-eight,” I admitted. “Yeah, I know. That’s a real long time between me and Isabella, right? Well, I was the reason my mama got married. Isabella was the attempt to save things, I think. Didn’t work, but I took care of that.”

Cody sat up a little. “How?”

I scoffed, pretty sure she was thinking the worst about me. “I bought them a house! Took almost a year to make enough, back when I was a rookie, which is why I get where you’re comin’ from. But don’t worry - soon enough, you’ll be making me chase you.”

“You’re the greatest bull rider in PBR history, though,” she pointed out.

I just nodded at that. “Yep. I have this theory that if we’re chasing more than a check, it gives us a reason to ride a little harder.”

“Yeah, it does,” she breathed, just as my phone started to ring.

I had the thing clipped to the dash, so glanced over. I half expected it to be Ty, wanting to check in on our girl. Instead, the screen simply said, “Max,” so I reached out to swipe at it quickly, wondering what my sponsors wanted.

“Hey, Max,” I said.

“J.D.!” he greeted me, sounding as cheerful as ever. “When are you getting to Cheyenne?”

“Tonight,” I told him. “We’re in Nebraska right now. Why, what’s up?”

“You’ve decided you’re Cody Jennings’s mentor, right?”

“Mhm,” I agreed.

“Well, since Tillman is her main sponsor, I’ve had a few other reps asking me about her. They aren’t convinced yet, but they wanted to have a sit down with her on Thursday. I’m guessing you’ll want to give her a head’s up, right?”

“Or you can,” I joked, glancing over at Cody, who was completely silent beside me.

“I just want to take care of her,” Max said. “That woman’s going to end up winning Rookie of the Year at the rate she’s going. I just need you to keep her out of the wrong kind of trouble, ok?”

“And what kind of trouble is that?” I asked.

“Pushing too hard and getting hurt,” Max began listing, “not taking the time to heal, saying the kind of stuff the sponsors wouldn’t like - “

But I cut him off there. “And what kind of stuff is that? Max, you know they’re gonna pull out that lady-like shit soon enough.”

“I meant things like disparaging the product,” he assured me. “C’mon, J.D., you know how to play this game. And with her being a woman, it’s opening up some opportunities for other companies to finally break into the PBR. So, I’m going to give her a call, see if she needs me to fly out there, and I can set all of this up for Thursday, if you think she’ll be there?”

“I dunno...” I said, looking over at Cody. “You think we’ll be there by Thursday?”

On the phone, Max groaned. “She’s sitting right there, isn’t she?”

“Oh yeah,” I promised, “and you’re on speaker. We should hit Cheyenne around eight tonight. Later if we stop too long.”

“Cody?” Max asked.

“Yeah?” she said, her voice just a little higher and softer than normal. I was starting to realize that meant she was nervous.

“These are sponsors wanting to know about patches on your vest and chaps,” he said. “Would you like me to show up and run interference?”

I nodded at her, so she said, “Yes, please. Max, I really don’t know what I’m doing yet.”

“Don’t worry,” he promised. “You just ride the bulls. I’ll handle everything else. Also, this is your first paying weekend, so I was planning to show up anyway and give you the chaps and vest.” He chuckled. “The green rhinestones look nice, too. Good call on that. I poked Ariat for you too, so they’ll be there. Pretty sure they aren’t quite ready to make a deal yet, so ride good this weekend.”

“Ariat pays good,” I assured her. “They’re also on all the top riders. It’s like a seal of approval.”

“I’m wearing their boots,” she pointed out.

“Perfect,” Max said. “So, I’ll get in around noon tomorrow. I figure you should be awake by then, or close. Right now, you’re sitting at eighteenth in the world standings, up from thirty-four at the start of Tulsa. If you can bump up a few more spots in Cheyenne, I’m pretty sure we can close a few of these.”

“So, ride good,” she said.

“Ride safe,” he clarified.

I grunted at that. “Ride hard,” I told her. “Get in there, get ‘er done, and get the check, babe.”

“I can do that,” Cody agreed.

“All-righty,” Max said, sounding like he was about to end the call.

So I stopped him. “Hey, Max? Figure you need to know that Cody’s got some cowboys chasing her.”

“I saw the awards in St. Louis,” he assured us. “That bullfighter surprised me. Figured Ty McBride would be the one pulling off something like that.”

“Yeah...” I said. “Max, we need to talk when you get here. Cool?”

“Can do, J.D.,” he assured me. “Anything I should brace for?”

“Whole lot,” I decided. “I’d just rather do this face to face, if you don’t mind?”

“After Cody’s meeting then,” he told me. “That way I’ll have all night for you.”

“Thanks, Max,” I said. “Now I’ll let you run off.”

“Drive safe, you two,” he told us. “Glad to be working with you, Cody. I’ll see you tomorrow to get your stuff to you.”

I reached over to disconnect the call, then glanced over to check on Cody. “I’m gonna tell him.”

“That I’m dating three guys?” she asked. “Shit, J.D., no one will wanna sponsor me after that!”

“Well, I meant about me and Tanner,” I told her. “But I think you should tell him that too. See, Max’s job is to cover for us. Now, there ain’t a single reason why you can’t date a few guys at the same time. Shit, do you know how many girls some of these guys are with? Got a wife at home and a girl waiting in each town. All of them think they’re the only one, too. So if they can do that, then why can’t you?”

“Because we’re touring together,” she pointed out. “Because you’re my competition. Because this isn’t something that stays behind the chutes or in the hotels and bars. This is...” She reached up to shove her hair back. “I’m a slut! That’s what they’ll say.”

“Real hard to be a slut when you’ve been with exactly two guys,” I countered.

“Like anyone would believe me,” she said. “See, that’s the thing. It doesn’t matter how many guys I’ve *actually* been with. It only matters how many they think I have. Girls are supposed to be lady-like, and polite, and - “

“Bullshit.” I slashed my hand through the air between us. “Let’s just stop that shit now, before it can even start. Girls also aren’t supposed to ride bulls, right? Cuz that’s what a few of those guys are sayin’.”

“See!” she gestured like I’d just made her point for her.

“And you’re the one who said we need to change things up,” I reminded her. “Just means you need to stop being the good girl, Cody, and start acting like the rest of us.”

“But how?” she asked. “I mean, it sounds great when I’m in the shower with two naked men, but I’ve been thinking about it. How exactly do I change things up? What can I even do? My job is to stay on the bull for eight seconds, do it again the next night, not break myself too bad in the process, and then repeat the whole thing the next weekend. Where in all of that is a chance for me to change things?”

Yeah, she had a bit of a point, but I was pretty sure I had another one. “You’re my rookie,” I said.

“And?” she pressed.

“Mine,” I told her, daring to glance over. “Cody, c’mon. We all know I got a reputation. I mean, I worked real hard to earn it, so I’m ok with it. But, ya know how it all started?”

“No,” she mumbled.

I thrust out my lower lip and nodded, warming up for this. “Well, when I was a rookie, I rode as José Adkins. Little Mexican boys behind the chutes didn’t get treated real good back then. So, some fucker decided to shove me around, and I shoved back. Then I hit back. For that first year, it was real touch and go, because I didn’t have the money to pay for a fine. If someone hadda complained? Yeah, I woulda been out.”

“Which is why you had Ty get me out of the bar,” she agreed.

I began bobbing my head again. “Yup, but see, that was when I first met ya. I thought you might be a real nice girl who’d get scared off with the shit we guys throw down.”

“Uh huh...” She shifted, her feet moving a little closer to my balls, but I was pretty sure she didn’t realize it. “So you thought I’d break, huh?”

“Somethin’ like that,” I admitted. “Mostly, I was scared you’d get flustered, get on a bull, and get hurt comin’ off. I was real scared that the first girl brave enough - and good enough - to ride in the Tough Enough series wouldn’t wanna come back. So, I made sure that Austin figured out you might have a little backup.”

“You didn’t have to cut him,” she chided.

I laughed. “Yeah, babe, I kinda did. See, he’ll remember that lesson for a bit. And next time, you’ll be the one holdin’ the empty bottle, because I’ll pay the fines. You’re my rookie. I’m your mentor. I’m also a no-good piece of shit that no one wants to fuck with.”

“I don’t know how to fight,” she admitted. “Don’t get me wrong, I can take care of myself, but I’ve never been in a fistfight like that. Or a bottle fight! I’m not sure I’d know what to do.”

I let my hand slide over her smooth leg one more time, tugging them both even higher. “Neither do they, Cody. Neither do they. All ya gotta do is treat ‘em like a bull. Yell real loud, flail your hands a bit, and no matter what happens, do not run away. And if they get too close?”

“Tap ‘em in the head?” she asked, clearly knowing exactly how the bullfighters worked.

“Yeah. With your fist, Cody. Not your riding arm, though.”

“Nope,” she said around a laugh. “I’m right-handed. I just ride with my left because I kept messing up my right.”

“That’s my girl,” I praised. “I’m gonna make you a smaller, sexier version of me. Just wait.”

“And that,” she teased, “is why I’m wearing black and pink? Because it’s like J.D. light?”

The laugh that burst from my mouth was a little too loud, because she had a point. “Yeah, I like that. We’re gonna win this year, you know that? Me and you? We’re gonna clean up, and I’m gonna teach you everything I know.”

“And next year,” she decided, “I’ll be the one winning at Finals.”

I murmured my agreement, but in my head, I was counting up her points. She wasn’t as far behind as she thought, and while she definitely wouldn’t win every event - no one did, and I wasn’t about to make it easy on her - she had a chance. Most riders could win one weekend and come in dead last the next.

Not Cody. Nope. This girl was gonna hit the top five every single time. She just rode too good for anything else. She was too consistent, too stable, and much too driven for anything else. That was why I liked her. She rode hard because she didn’t have any other choice. This sweet, innocent little lady riding shotgun in my truck had no fucking clue how good she was, but me? Yeah, I was gonna make sure she never had a reason to doubt it.

I was gonna make her the next legend in the PBR.

CHAPTER 3



SEVEN HOURS alone in my truck was way too much time to think. When I'd talked Cody into coming to St. Louis for the PBR event, I'd expected her to ride to Cheyenne with me. Yeah, she'd sat beside me for the first day, but that made the long hours feel even more empty today, and the silence had my brain working a little too hard.

Even worse, my best friend was taking a week off from the tour. Hannah's pregnancy was far enough along now that her doctors didn't want her traveling anymore. Even our sports medicine doctor, Doc Stephens, agreed it was too risky - which pissed Hannah off. But she wanted to do the best for their baby, so Renato was making sure she'd be comfortable back at his ranch in Texas while he'd be flying to each of our events.

My problem was that I didn't want to bother him. Having a kid on the way was a little more important than my issues. Still, I wasn't real sure how to handle this mess with Cody. She and J.D. got along a little too well. Tanner had just stepped up to take the stage as her official boyfriend. Granted, having one bullfighter on her side meant she'd have all three of them.

All weekend long, I'd been faking my ass off. I told her I was fine with this. I made it clear I had my own kinks, and she'd accepted that. Worse, the whole reason she was with Tanner was because she'd thought he was gay, only to find out he was bisexual - or something. I hadn't really asked the guy what term he preferred to use. All I knew was that he was a

switch-hitter, had his eye on my girl, and I'd told her I was down for this.

The truth was I was scared shitless.

Yeah, I was fine with people dating whoever they wanted. Gay, bi, ace, poly, or any of the others in that LGBTQ acronym? Yep, all good. Didn't bother me none. Having to compete with two other guys for her attention? That changed all the rules - mostly because I wasn't quite sure what I had to offer her.

Still, J.D. had called my ass out for trying to claim her, and he was right. More than that, I actually *liked* her. Not in a fuck her and leave her sorta way either. Nah, I honestly enjoyed talking to that girl. I liked having her at my side at the events. That one day last week when I'd seen her in her own stomping grounds? It had been amazing.

But Tanner was a damned good bullfighter. That guy had been earning a name for himself with his crazy saves this year. I couldn't count how many wrecks he'd prevented, or how many more he'd kept from getting worse. Bulls had thrown him into the air, the stands, and definitely the dirt more times than I could count.

J.D., on the other hand, was the best bull rider in the PBR right now. He'd been on this merry-go-round for almost nine years, and five of them, he'd been the one taking home the big check at the end of the year. He probably had a whole drawer filled with those coveted gold buckles that named him the World Champion. I was still trying to earn just one of my own.

But how was I supposed to compete with that? I was just Ty McBride, the playboy of the PBR. For almost five years now, I'd taken home a different girl every night - and never talked to her again. Yeah, I had a reputation, but it wasn't for riding bulls. It was for riding the buckle bunnies.

When it had been just me and J.D., this whole arrangement had sounded like a pretty sweet deal. I'd get to enjoy a little live porn while I got off, and she'd get to feel like she was being bad. I knew J.D. was wild, so it wouldn't take long before Cody realized it too. Then, along came Tanner.

Now, I was starting to second-guess everything. This, us, some kind of fucked-up polyamorous relationship, and that pretty little girl from Missouri taking up the spotlight every weekend. The whole idea of us just making this all work sounded great.

Unfortunately, reality never worked out like that.

About an hour outside Cheyenne, I stopped to fill up my truck, knowing I'd be using it a bit this weekend. As the meter kept ticking higher, my phone vibrated in my pocket with a text. Hoping it was Cody, I was swiping and reading just a little too fast. Sadly, she hadn't sent it. Instead, this was from J.D.

J.D.:

No suites. Got a set of attached rooms, though. Front desk has a key for you.

Ty:

And Tanner?

J.D.:

Don't pout. I'm sending him a message next. Also, Cody might have some more sponsors. Tell you when you get here. How long?

Ty:

About an hour. Fueling up.

J.D.:

Means I got some time to see if these beds squeak.

Yeah, I quit there. I wasn't sure if he was yanking my chain or serious. It also didn't matter, but as soon as my truck was full, I was back on the road and driving just a bit faster than before. Turning my GPS on, I let it give me directions through the city and to the hotel that would be our home for nearly a week.

The place was just like every other Marriott I'd stayed at this year, but in a nice way. It felt like a little stability on the road. After finding a parking space and gathering up the most important of my bags, I hauled my ass inside. At the front desk, a real cute girl looked up with one of those sweet smiles that came with customer service.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"Ty McBride. I heard my partner already checked in?"

She began typing, then nodded at me with another one of those professional smiles. "Yes, sir. Let me get your key."

Soon enough, I had a key in my hand and the elevator was heading up to the second floor. Chasing the signs in the hall, I made my way to room 219, then slid my card into the electronic lock. It clicked - and I stepped into a completely empty room. Not what I'd expected, but ok. Moving to the closest bed, I dropped my haul on it, then pulled out my phone.

Ty:

I'm here.

J.D.:

Unlock that door over by the windows.

I looked up and saw what he was talking about. There was a panic latch on it as well as a deadbolt. Once those were released, I pulled open the door to find another on the other side, and J.D. holding it wide open. Ok, that was convenient. But before I could say anything, J.D. lifted a finger to his lips.

"She passed out while I was having a shower." Then he tilted his head over to one of the beds.

I swore an angel was lying there. Cody's blond hair was spread out behind her. The shorts she was wearing were damned short, showing off all of her long, fit legs. Her tank had twisted around, revealing a hint of a pink bra underneath, but she was curled on her side, hugging her arms to her chest, and completely on top of the blankets.

So I stepped back, letting J.D. come over to my side. “What the hell did you do to her on the way here?” I teased, hoping he wasn’t gonna say that he’d pulled over for a little “pit stop” to get her naked or anything.

The bastard just rolled his eyes at me. “We talked.”

Then he kept walking until he threw himself down on my bed, face up. Thankfully, he kept his damned boots off the blankets. The fool also smirked at me like he was waiting for my meltdown. Evidently, he knew me just a little too well.

“And?” I pressed.

“You worried I fucked her?” he asked.

Why yes, yes I was. I’d also die before I admitted it. “No. Just looks like she’s wiped out.”

J.D. chuckled. “I’m sure she is. Tulsa, St. Louis, and now Cheyenne? That’s a whole lot of excitement that it sounds like our girl isn’t used to.” He lifted his arms to lace his fingers behind his head like a pillow. “Max is coming up because he got her some more sponsors, it sounds like. Also sounds like they aren’t sure about her yet.”

I nodded before grabbing the closest chair and dropping into it. “Makes sense. How many rookies show up, do great until they get hurt, then vanish to never ride again?”

“And a girl,” J.D. said. “Sponsors are gonna wanna figure out what people think about that.”

“True,” I agreed. “No reason to hang your name on the PBR’s embarrassment.”

He pointed at me like he was shooting a gun. “That. Pretty sure the PBR doesn’t know what they wanna do with her yet either. So, you and me? Yeah, we need to make sure this girl is riding at the top of her game.”

“Easy,” I said. “She’s already - “

A tapping from the other room made both of us look over. J.D. hopped up from the bed faster than his broken body should’ve been able to, then hurried back to his room. I followed just as the tap came again. On the bed, Cody sucked

in a breath and sat up. Her eyes landed right on me, but J.D. kept going to his door.

“Hey,” I said, my lips curling into a smile.

She reached up to rub at one eye with the back of her hand. “I think I passed out.”

Which was when J.D. opened the door to reveal Tanner on the other side, clutching a cheap bouquet of flowers. When I looked over, so did Cody, and her lips split into a grin. The best part, though, was the look on Tanner’s face when he realized it was J.D. on the other side. The bullfighter quickly dropped the flowers and looked back at me.

“Um, Cody here?” he asked.

“Let him in,” she told J.D.

“Aw, man...” J.D. groaned. “But I thought I was gonna get some flowers!”

“Fuck off,” Tanner told him as he pushed past J.D. and into the room. Then he lifted the flowers again. “Something for the room,” he told her, thrusting them out only a little awkwardly.

But Cody’s smile had turned into the sweet kind. Yeah, I might be thinking about all the ways Tanner could’ve played this better, but it seemed she didn’t care. Nope, Cody just hopped off the bed and hurried over to take them.

“Thank you,” she breathed, wrapping both hands around the plastic that contained the flowers.

“Hey, um...” Tanner looked over at me, then back to J.D. “You mind?”

Lifting my hands, I stepped back, but nope, I wasn’t about to leave. J.D. headed to the bathroom, where I heard him fumbling around with something. Realizing this was the best he was getting, Tanner sighed just a little too heavily.

“Cody, can I take you out tomorrow night?”

I couldn’t stop a laugh from slipping out. “Taking her in the RV?”

“My truck,” J.D. hollered back.

“Nice dinner,” Tanner told her, struggling to ignore us. “Nothing too crazy. Maybe a few drinks after? Just us?”

Cody glanced over at me, and her cheeks were getting pinker by the second. “Ok,” she mumbled.

I opened my mouth to say something just as J.D. walked out of the bathroom. It was like the asshole knew, because he was glaring at me with a look that clearly told me to shut my mouth again. Yeah, I did.

“We don’t have to,” Tanner quickly assured Cody. “I just figured a real meal might be nice - my treat. And, um, I dunno. Maybe get to know you a bit, since we’re dating now and all.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” she told him. By now, her cheeks were truly red. “When?”

“Five,” he decided, taking a step back. “And I’d love to stay longer, but Aubree’s heading home tomorrow, so I promised the guys we’d give her a good sendoff tonight.”

“Wait, Aubree’s leaving?” Cody asked. “And Hannah’s not here?”

“Most of the wives don’t go the whole tour,” I explained. “A weekend here or there, sure, but they fly in and fly out all the time.”

Cody jiggled her head in an adorably cute nod. “So what am I supposed to wear?” she asked Tanner.

“Jeans,” he decided. “Something cute - kinda like that shirt.” And he took another step back. “I’m gonna be a gentleman and everything.”

That made the cutest little smile appear on Cody’s lips. “I’ll hold you to it.”

And then they shared a look like the pair had some secret I didn’t know about. I wasn’t about to ask, but I was pretty sure “gentleman” was some kind of code word. Worse, when I looked over at J.D., the crazy boy of the PBR was grinning like he knew all about what was going on.

I was also pretty sure he wouldn’t tell me a damned thing. Meant I was gonna have to up my game a bit if I wanted to

keep this girl's attention. Good thing I was good at that.

CHAPTER 4



I MET up with Max in the hotel lobby the next morning. He gave me a box with my new chaps and protective vest in it, along with another business card for him. Then we agreed on a time to talk to all the other reps who wanted to know if I was the real deal. Max told me what to wear - jeans and boots - then promised he'd handle everything else.

I had to give it to J.D., the guy was an amazing rep. His pants might be just a little too new, and his shirt was definitely too stiff, but he seemed to be damned good at his job, and that was all that mattered. So, with that settled, I headed back to my room to worry about what I was going to wear to this date tonight.

Surprisingly, Ty had a few suggestions. He picked out the blingy jeans Shelby had made me buy for just this reason. J.D. found a cute little shirt in my bag. I picked my own underwear, just because I not only wanted it to match, but I didn't want those two to see what I was wearing.

Because this was a big night. Tanner probably didn't know it was my first real date. Then again, J.D. may have told him. Either way, I was both excited and nervous at the same time. I kept trying to tell myself there was nothing to be ashamed of, Ty and J.D. wouldn't be pissed about this, and I was going to have fun. Still, I kept worrying I was gonna fuck this all up.

Right at five, Tanner knocked on the door, and I looked good. My hair was down and curled. My face had makeup on it. Not too much, though, because I wasn't any good at the sultry looks my best friend had tried to teach me, so I'd gone

for simple. Tanner had on a pair of jeans, well-worn boots, and a shirt that was so damned tight, it looked like it had been painted on. It showed off every muscle in his body.

“Keys,” J.D. called before tossing his set across the room at Tanner. “You got your key for the room, Cody?”

I patted my back pocket. “Yep.”

“Then have fun, kids. Ty and I are gonna hang out for a bit, then get a few drinks tonight, so don’t come home early.”

But he and Tanner shared a look, which made me think they had something planned. Feeling only slightly nervous about all of this, I let Tanner lead me out and down the hall, listening to the door close behind us. I really hoped this wasn’t the thing that was going to blow up in my face. So far, riding with the PBR had been amazing - and I didn’t want to sabotage it.

Tanner walked to the elevator with me, both of his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans. “I tried to find a place for a meal, but Google wasn’t too helpful,” he explained. “So, you get to pick. Applebee’s or Olive Garden?”

“Olive Garden,” I decided. “I deserve some carbs.”

That earned me a little grin. “Not too boring for you?”

I shook my head just as the elevator arrived. “Nope. Truth be told, this is my first official date, Tanner.”

“J.D. told me,” he admitted as we piled on. “I’m a little surprised, though. I mean, there had to be something besides those asshole bull riders in your hometown.”

“Not really.”

I glanced over to find him watching the numbers tick down. Since it was only one floor, the door opened quickly and we headed to the parking lot. J.D.’s truck was impossible to miss. From having his name plastered on the back to the size of the thing, it stood out even with all the other trucks parked beside it.

The ride over was only a little awkward. Tanner made easy small talk, but I felt like I should be doing something more.

Yeah, I was overthinking this whole date thing, in a bad way. But once we arrived, sat down, and had drinks and breadsticks in front of us, it felt like I could finally relax.

“So how’d you start riding?” Tanner asked.

I tore off a hunk of bread. “I don’t honestly remember. See, my dad was a bull rider back when that was still with the rodeo. Mom was a barrel racer, so rodeo was in my blood, I guess. After losing my mom, my dad spoiled me as much as he could, so I was mutton busting early. He’d go ride a bull, then I’d ride sheep for the kiddie event, and he’d talk about it like we were equals. That turned into calves when I got too big for the sheep, then steers when I was older. I started with bulls when I was in high school.”

“It seems like Dean’s ok with it,” Tanner pointed out.

I nodded. “For the longest time, I convinced myself he didn’t think I was good enough because he kept trying to talk me into quitting and going to college.”

“Never finished high school myself,” Tanner admitted.

“Really?” I asked.

He nodded slowly. “Yep. Had a shitty year. Got into bullfighting when I was younger because of my uncle, and when everything was imploding, he got me working a local rodeo circuit as a clown. That got me out of town, and I kept going until I became an alternate for the PBR. Now I’m on the main string.”

“Nice,” I said.

He looked up, his pretty hazel eyes a little more green than I’d remembered. “That is not what most people tell me.”

“But I’m basically doing the same thing,” I reminded him. “I just sit on the bulls instead of jumping under them.”

He laughed, and the sound was amazing. The waitress came around to get our orders, promising she’d get them right out, but the break changed things just a bit. Tanner glanced at me from under his pretty bronze lashes, smiled, and then shifted over to the corner on his side of the booth.

“I feel like I’m doing this dating thing the wrong way around,” he admitted. “I mean, I made a damned fool out of myself in St. Louis.”

“It was cute,” I mumbled.

“Is that the whole brush off kind of cute, or the kind that gets me a blush?” he pressed.

Right on command, my cheeks began to heat up. “Fuck off!”

He laughed, tossing his head back to do it. “You are the strangest mix, Cody Lane.”

“I never should’ve told you about my name,” I grumbled.

“Nah,” he assured me. “I think it’s fitting, actually. I like it.” He reached over for his glass of soda. “I also like you. I just don’t know more than the fact that you ride bulls like a pro and look a little too good in a pair of jeans.”

“I’m not sure there’s more to know,” I admitted.

“There’s always more to know,” he promised. “I mean, I can make some guesses, like that you listen to country music, know how to ride a horse, and are a whole lot tougher than you think you are. So what did a girl like you do before you showed up in Tulsa?”

Ok, he was quickly winning me over, talking like that. “I rode bulls and stacked hay,” I admitted.

“And?” he pressed.

“No, that’s pretty much it. I worked at the Circle K for a while with my best friend, but quit a couple months back when they wouldn’t give me time off for a rodeo. Those points got me into Tulsa, so I don’t regret it.”

“Nice,” he praised. “So how’d you end up without all the boys chasing you around?”

I huffed. “Tanner, they hated me from the time I was twelve. I won junior steer riding. See, Daddy couldn’t afford a horse. Gerardo - the guy with the hay - used to have some bucking bulls. Nothing good, mind you, but he had them. His

boys would practice on them, and I'd walk over and take my turn. Gave me more chances to learn than the guys I was riding against at that age."

"And you kept winning, huh?"

"Nope. After that, I was always second. Worse, the award for junior steer riding? A plaque."

"And last weekend you won," he reminded me as our dinner arrived.

The waitress handed out the food, refilled our drinks, and then left us alone. I bent to take a bite of my creamy pasta, but Tanner just watched me with a little smile. Only when I had it in my mouth did he take his own bite, but the interruption was just enough to let the conversation shift again.

"So this thing," I said, holding up a hand in front of my mouth. "It's kinda weird, right?"

"You mean poly?" he asked, shrugging to show what he thought of that. "Or do you mean that I got completely busted last weekend?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but had to pause. "Both," I decided.

Tanner took another bite. "In truth, I'm freaking out a little," he finally said. "Only three people knew about me before that, and all of them ride in that RV with us."

"That you're, um..." I wasn't sure which term to use.

"Pansexual," he offered. "Sounds better than bi, I think." His eyes jumped over to me. "And I'm waiting for you to say it's gross, or that God's gonna be pissed, or something."

I just shook my head. "I was raised in a church that said we're supposed to do the lovin', and God's supposed to do the judging."

"I wasn't," he admitted. "Because I dated girls, it was all good. I didn't need to tell anyone what I did when I was alone, but I always knew my parents were the kind who wouldn't be ok with it."

“But you dated guys on tour?” I asked. “J.D. said that’s how Austin figured it out. He saw a guy leaving your room.”

“Didn’t happen,” he promised. “First, I don’t have a hotel room by myself. We all share. If a guy left, it was probably room service or something. Second, I never brought guys to my place. I always went to theirs.”

“But it’s happened,” I pointed out.

He nodded slowly. “Yeah. Sometimes I meet someone. Most times I just hang with my crew. Jorge’s married. Isaac’s more interested in sitting still for a minute - because we don’t usually get that.”

“And you?” I asked.

“I don’t really know,” he admitted. “Cody, I’m not a celebrity like the bull riders. I don’t go to some bar, find someone, and have a wild night. I spend my evenings with sports medicine most times. The rest, we’re on the road. I like to cook, because we camp a lot on our trips between events. I like the rush of making a save in the arena. I love the way it feels to work with Jorge and Isaac like we’re sharing a brain. That’s what I’m addicted to.”

“And J.D.?” I asked.

He laughed and ducked his head. “Ok, I’ve had a little crush on him for a while.”

“I always thought he was a dick,” I admitted.

“He is,” Tanner confirmed. “Thing is, J.D.’s a dick for the right reasons. Don’t get me wrong, he is *crazy*. Flat out, without a doubt, no bullshit kind of crazy. It also makes him the best rider the PBR has ever seen.”

“Ty rides clean,” I pointed out. “I used to study his technique.”

Tanner murmured at that. “He does, but he gets bucked off more because he’s not aggressive enough. I’m not sure if he’s worried about getting hurt - which is valid - or if he just doesn’t want it as much. J.D.? He rides his bulls like it’s a fight, and he’s not about to lose.”

“I wanna do both,” I admitted.

“You’re well on your way,” he assured me. “You sit those bulls like you’re a part of them. You just need to take a few more risks if you wanna score higher.”

“Spurring,” I said. “That’s where I suck. I just can’t get the points because I don’t have enough legs.”

“And you’re at least an inch taller than Emilio,” Tanner said. “Cody, if you want to make a career on sponsor payouts and longevity, then ride like Ty. If you wanna get into the Hall of Fame, then ride like J.D. That’s pretty much what you have to decide.”

I spun up another forkful of pasta. “Know something, Tanner? This?” I looked up and met those pretty hazel eyes again. “I’ve never had a guy willing to sit around and talk about this stuff with me before. Most people think I’m playing at it. So, I dunno, thanks?”

“I love talking bull riding,” he promised. “I live for this sport. I’m just no good at your side of it. Doesn’t mean I haven’t been in that arena long enough to pick up a few things.”

“Like?” I asked.

“I know every bull, every rider’s weakness, and all the techniques discussed by the announcers in my headset.” He flashed me a smile. “And yeah, I know what they’re saying about you on ESPN, too.”

“And?” I begged before shoving the pasta into my face.

Tanner chuckled. “They’re saying your technique is good, but you’re too weak to keep up. Women don’t have the upper body strength to stay with it. If you get bucked off, you’ll break because you’re more fragile or something. They’re saying, Cody, that you’re exciting because everyone thinks you’re about to be the next big wreck.”

“Fuck,” I grumbled.

“So prove to them you’re not,” he said. “Let’s show them that a pan boy from Iowa, a bi guy from Tennessee, and a

pretty little lady from Missouri can get shit done when we wanna, and that those labels they wanna slap on us aren't gonna slow any of us down."

"And Ty?" I asked, aware he'd left him off of that.

Tanner shrugged. "You're the one sleeping with him."

I closed my eyes and groaned. "I'm gonna kill J.D. He sucks at keeping a secret."

"It came up when he was threatening to cut off my balls if I treated you wrong," Tanner assured me. "So don't kill him yet. He also made it very clear that you like the guy, I can't screw that up for you, but that if I play my cards right, I might still have a chance."

"I'm winging this," I told him.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Me too. Cody, I haven't been on a date in years. I'm fumbling here, ok? I also really want that chance, so I was thinking that maybe, after dinner, we might go get some drinks and I can show you that I know how to dance?"

I scrunched up my face at him. "I really don't."

"Two-step?" he asked.

"Barely," I admitted. "My only balance is on the back of a bull."

"My toes can take it," he assured me. "And maybe I shouldn't admit this, but I like that. You, Cody Lane, are nothing at all like what I expected."

"What exactly did you expect?" I asked.

"For you to either be super girly to make up for your sport, or to be super butch to prove that you're as good as the guys." He tipped his head at me. "This? There's something real about you. Something I can respect."

I liked that word. Respect. It wasn't the sort of thing I'd gotten a lot of in my life, and hearing him say it like that? Coming from a guy with a body like his, who was sitting across from me so casually, like we were already friends and nothing else mattered? I liked it a whole lot.

CHAPTER 5



THE REST of dinner was comfortable after the conversation shifted to bulls. Tanner really did know a lot, and he was willing to share. Didn't matter if that was how Austin used the kind of suicide wrap that would one day get him killed, or how Cletus, the clown on the circuit, was about to get divorced yet again.

It felt like the moment we'd given up on trying to do this date the right way, everything fell right into place. It seemed the bullfighters knew all the dirty secrets. That even included when Kaleb had been chased out of his hotel room by some crazy broad he'd taken home. I got to hear all about him screaming and running naked down the hall with everyone trying to figure out who was dying.

Before I knew it, my pasta bowl was empty, Tanner was paying the tab, and the pair of us were giggling like old friends about all of it. Just as we made it to the truck, Tanner checked to make sure I was still interested in doing a little dancing. It actually sounded like fun, so we headed to a bar just down the road.

The music was loud, but playing songs I knew. In the middle was a dance floor with people slowly making their way around it. Tanner flashed me one of those sweet all-American smiles he was so good at, then led me out into the middle of it. When his arm found my waist, I grabbed his shoulder, putting us chest to chest, and then he started leading.

I really wasn't any good at this, but there was something about being pressed up against him that had me smiling. His

hand shifted a little lower, finding that dip in my back, and he did his best to talk me through the steps. We didn't even make it all the way around before I shoved my foot right into his.

"Fuck," I breathed when he hopped.

But Tanner laughed. "Still not as heavy as a bull, Cody," he promised, grabbing my hips with both of his hands. "But I think you need more than a little help. Now don't fight me."

Hanging on to me like that, he showed me how to move, pushing each hip in time with the leg. Giving in, I tossed both arms around his neck and just went with it. There was now a little more space between us, but not that much.

"Just like riding a bull," he promised. "I move, you compensate."

"Oh, so you're the bull in this scenario?" I teased.

"Only one here with balls." Then he winked.

I couldn't help but laugh - but his little analogy actually helped. He moved, so I adjusted, and we started to move together. Once I finally had it down, Tanner caught my hand, pulling it away from his neck just to send me out in a spin. The moment I stopped, he was right there, even closer than before. I stopped thinking and just allowed myself to enjoy this.

"I wish I had your confidence," I told him.

That got me a confused look. "Fuck, I'm not confident," he promised.

"You seem like it to me."

He leaned in, putting his face beside my ear to be heard over the music. "I'm just trying to impress the prettiest girl in the whole PBR."

"The only one," I reminded him.

"Nope, still have the buckle girls." He leaned back to catch my eye.

Those buckle girls were stunning, though. They'd all been picked because of how pretty they were! For a moment, I felt my heart speed up a bit, and tried to tell myself he was just

sweet-talking me. The problem was J.D. had called me pretty too, and Ty had been flirting with me.

Deciding I had nothing left to lose, I asked, “Really?”

“That first day,” Tanner said, “when you were bent over by the rail? I leaned to see if you were ok and felt like I couldn’t breathe. It was a damned good ride, and here was this beautiful woman with a bloody nose.”

“Not exactly impressive,” I pointed out.

“And I wanted to scoop you up in my arms and carry you out of there,” he went on, shifting a little closer. “Figured that might get my ass kicked, though. Almost got into a fight with Ty the day we pulled out of Tulsa for saying you were hot.”

I huffed out a laugh. “No!”

“Yep,” he said. “Think it shocked him that I wasn’t about to back off, either.”

“Playing the long game, huh?”

His hand slid low enough to hook in my belt. “Was hoping to. Did not expect things to go the way they did. I mean, you catching me with - “

His words were cut off with a loud siren taking over the entire bar. The music stopped and everyone started looking around. Thankfully, it didn’t sound like an emergency beacon. More like someone had just won the jackpot or something.

Then lights came on in a room at the side, illuminating the red padding on the floor. There, in the very middle of it, was some drunken cowboy climbing onto a mechanical bull. I sucked in a breath to laugh, but Tanner tugged me that way.

“Let’s watch this,” he said.

Everyone else seemed to be having the same idea. Together, Tanner and I headed to the railing around the safety padding, but it was crowded. Making room, he pulled me in front of him, then dropped an arm on either side of me in an almost protective way. To my left, a group of cowboys were calling out jeers. To my right, a cluster of cowgirls were giggling.

And then the mechanical bull started moving slowly. The guy on its back clearly didn't have a clue what he was doing. From the way his eyes were glazed over, I was pretty sure he was completely trashed. That meant this was going to be good.

The controller slowly began to tilt and lean the thing, and the drunk guy managed to stick with it. Then it spun. When it began to do both - still slowly - it was more than the cowboy could take. He leaned a little too far forward and that was it. Across the room, his friends cheered, but I just laughed, turning in place to see Tanner.

"You should do it!" I said.

"Me?" He shook his head. "Oh, no."

"Bet you'd be better than that," I teased.

A little smile had his lips curled to one side. "Ok, but you're gonna owe me one."

"Yes!" I squealed, slipping out from his arms to head over to the controller. "One more," I told the guy, pointing back at Tanner.

"He drunk?" the operator asked.

I shook my head. "Nope. He's also done this before, so don't be too easy."

Granted, Tanner had said he was bad at it, but the ground was padded, and I was sure this would hurt a lot less than getting flung around by a bull. So, handing over the twenty bucks for the ride, the operator promised me he wouldn't be too nice. I waved for Tanner to get on.

"Your turn!"

He tossed his arms up in defeat, but the grin on his lips convinced me he was having fun with this too. Plus, unlike a real bull, this one had a permanent handle and places to rest his feet. Tanner swung up on the fake-bull's back like he was mounting a horse, then nodded at the controller.

Music began to play, just like at the PBR. It was the same sort of down and dirty stuff that wasn't meant to last for very long, and the bull jumped up. Tanner hung on to it. The

mechanical bull turned, and I could see Tanner tilt a bit, but he wasn't done yet. Then it started bucking and spinning. At first, Tanner looked good. Compared to the drunk guy before, he wasn't doing too bad, but when the operator tilted the back end up, it was all over, save for the laughing.

Tanner slipped, letting go with his hand. The next spin sent him off the side, and he crashed down to the mats only to lie there laughing for a moment. Me? I was clapping and cheering.

"And," the operator said into the microphone beside him, broadcasting it to the entire crowd, "to help this young man out with his pride, how about a free ride for his girlfriend?"

"What?" I asked, turning back.

The man was grinning at me. "I'll take it easy on you," he promised.

"C'mon, Cody!" Tanner yelled. "Cowboy up, girl."

"But..." I tried.

Tanner just pointed to the mechanical bull. "You owe me eight seconds."

It was his grin that convinced me. I'd never seen him look that happy - or as devious as J.D. - before. So, giving in, I headed over and shooed him out of the area. Then I climbed up on the thing, surprised that it was a lot like the barrel-bulls my daddy had originally trained me on. In other words, hard, stiff, and easy to ride.

"You ready, lil' lady?" the operator asked.

I shoved my hand into the handle, palm up, and nodded. Immediately, the thing began to jiggle. Around the side, I could see Tanner heading over to the guy, but this bull was just rocking like a child's toy. Then Tanner said something, and the bull started to even out. Bigger highs on the front end, and steeper angles when the back came up, but it was still nice and slow.

"Look at that, ladies and gentlemen," the operator said. "This lady seems to know a thing or two."

And then Tanner yelled. “Spur, rookie!”

The bull started to go faster. Then it began to spin. I pushed my hips into my hands, rocking with each movement, keeping my chin tucked and my eyes on the handle - since this bull didn't have withers. Faster, then faster still, and I had this. The thing leapt up, kicked high in the back, and changed directions. The whole time, I just rode.

At some point, people began cheering. I heard Tanner calling out my name like he was proud of me. I almost felt bad, like I was cheating, because it was different when the back didn't shift and bend. It was easier when my seat had a place carved out for it. But at the same time, I also realized what I'd been doing wrong with my legs.

Because each time the “bull” reared up, I wanted to pull my knees higher. When the front went down, my natural reaction was to shove my feet towards the armpits that didn't exist. In other words, I'd just figured out what Renato had tried to tell me about spurring. It wasn't enough to stick to their backs. If I wanted to get the good scores, I'd have to earn each and every one, but the natural motion was all I needed.

But this thing was starting to move fast. “Bodacious mode!” the operator announced.

And it went completely crazy. Up, a jiggle at the top, and then crashing back down. Yep, this felt like riding Without Ado, and when the mechanical bull turned to spin out of my hand, I felt myself slipping. My legs gripped the side, but I wasn't wearing spurs, and there was no flesh to press into. Faster, the thing turned, and I flew off to the side, hitting the mats hard enough to roll before popping up onto my feet.

Immediately, everyone began cheering.

“And I have just been informed,” the operator announced, “that this young lady is the new rookie on the Professional Bull Riders Tough Enough series. Let's hear it for Cody Jennings!” Which only made the crowd get even louder.

“That,” Tanner said from the gap that was meant to be the exit, “was hot.”

I marched my way over to him, refusing to yell over the noise. “Now, I think you owe me a little something.”

He caught my hips, pulling them up against his. “A kiss?”

“Well, I was gonna say a beer, but I think your idea is better.”

Immediately, his mouth found mine, kissing me hard. Not sexy like he had for the cameras. This time, Tanner kissed me the way I’d seen him kissing J.D.: like he knew I could keep up. I tossed an arm around his neck and pulled. He pressed his hips into me a little harder, making it clear that ridge wasn’t just from his jeans. Then his hand found my hair, grabbing nice and hard.

Yeah, I melted into him. Ty had been gentle and romantic. This? It was hot as fuck, and I was pretty sure I’d just started to figure Tanner out. He didn’t give a shit that I was a girl. He liked that I could keep up. Now, I just had to prove it.

So I kissed back. My tongue tangled with his. My fingers locked on the back of his neck. For just a moment, our mouths battled like it was some kind of a duel, and it was the hottest thing I’d ever experienced. This was wild, crazy, and over the top, just like all the best parts of my life.

And I liked it a little too much.

CHAPTER 6



J.D. HAULED my ass to the bar. I told him I was good with staying at the hotel and going over the bulls for our next event, but he wouldn't listen. He wanted a beer, said I had to drive, and wouldn't let up until I gave in. And yet, the moment we'd walked into this place, the first thing I'd seen was my girl sitting on a mechanical bull that was going as hard as it could.

For just a moment, my feet slowed as I got to actually appreciate her. Damn, she looked good like that. Her blonde hair was down, she'd left her hat in the room, and her shirt was not only tight, but also cut low enough to show off her curves. Someone called out "bodacious mode," and I wondered how many people even knew that was the name of the most famous bucking bull in the world. It also seemed to be the hardest mode for this mechanical bull.

Cody was doing good for a bit, but the first time she slipped, she was done. Oh, she tried to do everything right, but hard plastic, steel, or whatever that thing was made from wouldn't help her any. Sure enough, she flew off to the left, rolled once, and then hopped up. The shitty part was when she walked right into another man's arms.

"Beer," J.D. said, passing me a bottle as he appeared at my side.

"Cody just rode the bull," I told him, refusing to look away from where Tanner was kissing her like he owned her body.

J.D. murmured. "Looks like that's going well."

Which was when I figured it out. “And you knew they’d be here?”

“Yup.” He flashed me one of those manic grins of his. “Because I figured you’d wanna dance with her, she needs to get used to the idea of being with whoever she wants, and I wanted a cold beer.”

“Mhm.” He wanted a lot more than a cold beer, and we both knew it.

“Oh,” J.D. added, “and I may have told the rest of the guys in our hotel that this was the bar for the night.”

Which meant no kissing on her. No stealing her away from Tanner. Nope, if the other riders were showing up here, then I’d have to watch her hang all over Tanner and keep my damned hands to myself.

“You,” I growled, “are a dick.”

“And you,” J.D. told me, “need to learn how to share. I’m teachin’ ya.”

Ok, he had a point. A good one. However, that brought up one big question that I simply couldn’t ignore. “How’d you learn?”

“Orgies.” The bastard slapped my arm, then wandered off, leaving me standing there at the side of a full bar, completely alone.

I managed to find a table, but somewhere in there, I’d lost sight of Cody. I knew Tanner would be taking good care of her, but that just rubbed the wrong way. Worse, I couldn’t figure out why J.D. didn’t bother me at all. The idea of bending her over while he fucked her face? Yeah, I was into that. The problem came when I tried to imagine replacing J.D. with Tanner.

It didn’t work for me.

Maybe it was because I knew J.D.? Possibly, it was because we were both bull riders. I tried to tell myself that part of it was because I knew J.D. had her best interests at heart,

but I was pretty sure the same was true for Tanner. Or maybe it was just because I didn't know him very well?

I knew Tanner was a damned good bullfighter. He was the crazy one who'd jump into a bull's horns to keep them off us. I knew he thought Cody was hot. Even thinking about that made me want to grumble about it, which made absolutely no sense. Then I figured it out.

Tanner wasn't a whore.

That was why he felt like a threat when J.D. didn't. He hadn't spent the last few years picking up a new girl at every new bar we found. He didn't wear his jersey as some way to get his dick sucked, like how we all made sure to wear shirts with sponsor patches. Tanner was a decent-looking guy with a good reputation, and he could talk bulls and bull riding as easily as I could.

In other words, he could steal her away from me. J.D.? Nah, he'd be fine with a timeshare. His reputation was worse than mine, and the only thing I had to worry about with him was who scored better - which Cody wouldn't care about. Tanner, however, was the kind of guy a girl would want to settle down with.

That was when I found her again. This time, she was on the dance floor. Tanner held her just a little too close, and she was smiling up at him in a way that said, "Please get me naked." Oddly, that didn't bother me. Nope, that girl deserved to live a little. Hell, it was one more thing to convince her she really could do everything we boys did. But damn, she looked good like that.

Her hair was the kind of real blonde that came with too many hours in the sun. Her lips were the shade of pink that begged a man to taste them. Her body was hard, small, and made to press up against a guy. That woman was stunning, and if Tanner didn't throw her in a bed tonight, then he was a damned fool.

"Sulking?" J.D. asked as he dropped down beside me.

This time, he had a collection of shots. From the color, I was gonna guess whiskey, so I grabbed one. Just to make sure - this was J.D. after all - I sniffed it first. Finding I was right, I tossed it back, then chased it down with another gulp of my beer.

“Guess you’re crashing with me,” I told him.

He flicked up both of his eyebrows in some parody of flirtation. “Oh yeah, big boy.”

I grunted at him, not impressed, and pointed to the couple on the dance floor with my beer bottle. “Because she needs some alone time.”

He tossed back one of the shots, then sucked a breath through his teeth. “So you’re good with this?”

“Yep,” I said.

He nudged a second shot towards me. “No bullshit, Ty.”

I pushed the shot back towards him. “No bullshit. I’m also driving.”

J.D. took the shot back, but just to spin it before him. “So, if you’re so good with this, then why have you been glaring at Tanner every time he shows up?”

Using the nail on my index finger, I began to pick at the label on my beer. “Girls like Cody?” I got a little piece up in the corner. “They might play around, but eventually they settle down. A husband, a white picket fence, a dog, and a handful of kids.” Then I tipped my head towards the dance floor. “He can give her that. We can’t.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong,” J.D. told me. “She don’t want a fence, a pet, or the kids.” He tossed that last shot back finally, then stood. “She wants a gold buckle, Ty. We boys? We take a back seat to that, unless we can stay the fuck outta her way.”

Then he slapped my arm and walked deeper into the bar. I heard someone call his name, and looked over in time to see one of the other American riders. His words stuck with me, though. Cody wanted this. Not the rush, or the fame. She

wanted the win. She wanted to taste immortality for about eight seconds, prove herself - to herself - and nothing was gonna stop her.

And that was what drew me to her. She was the kind of woman that didn't come around very often. The kind that dared a man to keep up. I lifted my beer and tossed another gulp down my throat, deciding I could handle that. My problem was that I was shit at this. Oh, I knew how to get the girls. I'd just never learned how to keep them.

"Need another?" a woman asked, pausing before my table.

Her eyes traveled down my body, convincing me she definitely wasn't a waitress. "Nope," I said. "I'm the driver tonight."

"Got a girl around here somewhere, then?" she tried next, a flirty little smile curling her lips.

Yeah, she was cute: lean, tall, with long dark hair. I would've taken her home a few weeks ago. Instead, I shook my head. "Playing the wingman tonight for some friends."

So she tipped her head at the chair. "You mind?"

I waved her to it, almost hoping Cody would turn around and see I wasn't alone. Sadly, I was pretty sure Cody didn't even know I was here. The girl slid into the chair, then leaned onto her elbows, giving me a real nice view down her cleavage. I jerked my eyes up to hang on to hers.

"Where's the accent from?" she asked.

"Canada," I admitted. "Lemme guess, you live around here?"

"I do," she almost purred.

Fuck. That sounded wrong. I was not trying to pick up this girl *or* get invited back to her place, but I was a little too used to setting things up, and the lines came out almost on their own.

"Cool," I said, looking over her shoulder for someone else I knew. Like J.D., since Renato wasn't here to bail me out of

my shit this time. “I’m guessing this is a local hot spot, huh?”
There. That was safe.

The pretty girl laughed. “Isn’t that why you came? Tell me, what does a guy like you do to drag him through the middle of Cheyenne?”

“Oh, got a little event this weekend,” I said, downing the last of my beer. “You ever heard of the PBR?”

“Bull riding?” she gasped. “Yes! I’ve got tickets.” Then her eyes narrowed. “Are you working there?”

“You could say that.”

So she thrust her hand over the table at me. “Lacey. You?”

I accepted her hand gently. “Ty.”

Her lips immediately fell open in an O. “McBride?”

Shit. She was a fan. Fuck, this girl wasn’t making it easy on me. “Yes, ma’am,” I assured her. “J.D. Adkins is around here somewhere too. So’s Cody Jennings.”

“Don’t know him,” she said, “but I know who J.D. is.”

“Her,” I corrected.

“Huh?”

“Cody,” I said. “She’s a her. First woman on the Tough Enough series. Damned good rider too. You should cheer her on.” Then I pushed back my chair. “Excuse me, Lacey.”

Because I was in too deep. Much too deep. If that girl kept smiling and leaning, then eventually I’d smile back. She’d flirt a little more, I’d fall into my old habits, and I would never have that cute little blonde sitting beside me in my truck again. Nope, I was not gonna fuck this up with the first girl - even if she was really fuckin’ smokin’ - who was brave enough to come up to me.

Instead, I headed straight for the dance floor and didn’t stop until I pushed in between Tanner and Cody. “I need to borrow her for a second,” I told Tanner.

Cody gave me a dirty look. “Really?”

“Trying to lose a persistent flirt,” I said.

Tanner just laughed and slapped my shoulder. “All yours, Ty. Warning, she *will* step on your toes.”

And sure enough, as soon as I got Cody moving again, she did just that, but I ignored it. “How’s your date?” I asked.

“Was pretty good until you pushed in,” she admitted.

So I leaned in close, right up next to her ear. “Only because I wanted to make sure you knew J.D. and I were here. Also, figured you might wanna know J.D. is crashing on my side tonight.” I looked over to check that she’d heard me, then kept going. “Tonight, every other bull rider in Cheyenne is finding someone to throw them in a bed. You should do the same if you wanna. And if you don’t, I’ll sic J.D. on Tanner’s ass.”

Cody sucked in a little breath, which was when I realized exactly what I’d said - and exactly how wrong that could be taken. And then, together, the pair of us began to laugh just a little too hard.

“No!” I tried to say. “Not like that.”

“Oh, it would be just like that,” she tittered. “You didn’t see them.”

“When?” I asked.

“When I caught them in the convention center,” she said, her eyes shining so brightly. “I didn’t even know guys could kiss like that.”

So I cupped the side of her face. “So you like him?”

Her teeth quickly clamped down on her lower lip. “I feel like I’m doing something wrong.”

“Nope,” I promised. “Baby, you are doing everything right. Just keep doing it, ok?”

She grimaced in the most adorable way. “And if I do invite Tanner to spend the night?”

“Condoms,” I told her, “are in J.D.’s bag. Trust me, I know he has some in there. We all do.”

“Cept the other night,” she reminded me.

“Nope,” I said again. “I had ‘em. I just wasn’t gonna take advantage of the one woman I didn’t wanna let get away.” Then the song stopped. “Now let’s go find your boyfriend again, hm?”

She took my hand, her little fingers holding me just right. “Ty? Thank you. For being cool, for pushing me, and, I dunno...”

Yeah, I kinda understood what she was trying to say, so I pulled her up against my side. “Babe, you’re a real bull rider now. That means that if you want it, all you gotta do is take it. I’m just trying to make sure you don’t forget that part.”

The smile that earned me? Yep, it was worth all the bullshit I was spewing. I was just glad I’d figured out the right thing to say this time, because those baby blues of hers were definitely rocking my world.

CHAPTER 7

TANNER



THE MOMENT I let Ty have a dance with Cody, I slipped off the dance floor and almost right into the chest of Austin. Well, J.D. had said he was going to make sure everyone knew this was the place to be tonight, and evidently it was working. I patted the man's arm and turned to go around him, but Austin caught me.

"You're letting your girl dance with Ty?" he asked.

I looked back to where the pair were shuffling somewhat awkwardly around the dance floor. "Yeah?"

"Not scared he's gonna steal her away?" Austin taunted. "Or maybe that's not a real concern for you?"

I tensed and took a step closer. "Look, I heard what you've been saying about me. We both know it's bullshit, but if you fuck things up with me and Cody? I'll make you pay for it."

"Yeah?" he taunted. "And you know they'll fire your ass if you don't keep the bulls off us."

"One second's a real long time when they're dancing on your head, Austin." Then I took another step closer. "Or maybe you're just trying to hide that you're the one sneaking guys around?" I asked.

"Shit..." he drawled.

"That wasn't a no," I pointed out, intending to push past him.

But Austin wasn't about to make this easy. "I'm not a fuckin' queer. Happy now?"

“Yep,” I said, stepping away from him without turning my back on the dick. “I’m just curious why you decided to pick me.” Then I smiled. “Or is it because I’m the one she’s talking to, and she’s already written your dumbass off for trying to grab her tits, mm?”

“You wish, Tanner,” Austin shot back.

I just lifted my palms and kept walking backwards. “Still the one who’ll have a real woman in his bed tonight.” Then I finally turned, lifting my hand over my shoulder with my middle finger straight up.

A moment later, J.D. appeared at my side, holding a pair of shots. “Looks like you need one of these,” he said, offering it over.

“Not drinking when I’m driving her around,” I assured him.

J.D. just stood there with a lost puppy look on his face. “Ty won’t drink with me because he’s driving. You won’t drink with me because you’re driving. What the fuck, man?”

“Give it to Cody,” I told him.

Instead, J.D. tossed back both shots, one after the other. “Next round,” he decided. “Although if she’s drunk...”

The warning he didn’t finish was clear. If Cody was drunk, she couldn’t consent. If I tried to take advantage of her, J.D. would make sure I never did it again. Hell, I’d probably be lucky to keep breathing if I pulled something as shitty as that.

So I let him steer me back to the bar. “Not so sure it’s going that way,” I admitted.

J.D. scoffed, then waved over a bartender. “Two more whiskeys for me, and a soda for him,” he ordered.

“Coke,” I clarified.

The woman nodded, then went to get those, but J.D. just looked back at me. “It’s going that way,” he promised. “We had a real long talk in the truck. She thinks you’re cute.”

“Long way from cute to fucking,” I told him. “I’m also not in a rush, J.D. I honestly like her, and I’m willing to take this at her pace.”

“She wants her pace to be a little faster but doesn’t know how to make the move.” Then he tossed a fifty up on the counter. “But I was serious about not being too kinky.”

“So what did she say?” I asked, because we’d had part of this talk back in St. Louis, but I hadn’t heard Cody’s side yet.

J.D. had said he was pretty sure Cody was inexperienced in bed. I hadn’t believed him, but when he reminded me of the guys from her hometown? Yeah, he had a point. So I’d asked him to find out, and he’d promised he would.

“Two,” J.D. said just as the bartender dropped his drinks before him.

“Let me get your change,” she said.

He just waved that off. “All yours.” Then he pushed the bottle of coke at me, grabbed his shots, and jerked his head for me to follow. “Ok, her problem isn’t being shy or saving herself. It’s that her town was small. Like, fucking podunk, Tanner. The boys hated her for showing them up. The men were married. She doesn’t even think she’s pretty.”

“Cody?” I asked, unable to believe that.

He nodded, then claimed an empty table to set down his drinks, making it clear I should join him. “She’s a tomboy at best, according to her. Oh, I did my damndest to make it clear she’s wrong. She also thinks you’re cute, and wants to try being a little wild, but her love life consists of missionary. She says oral sex is a waste of time.” He looked at me and lifted a brow.

There was just one problem with all of this. “J.D., this is weird.”

“This is me being her mentor. Now, all y’all idiots think that means just for riding bulls, but I promise that’s not where it ends. I’m gonna teach that girl how to be the king of her own world, and that no one should ever try to put her in her place, because her place is at the top.”

I heard him. I also heard how damned emphatic he was about it. “You in love with her?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Workin’ on it.” Then he met my eyes again, but this time the look was almost a dare, as if he expected me to call him out.

I knew his eyes were brown, but they were the darkest shade of it I could imagine. Like fresh-roasted coffee on a sunny morning, they made me want to curl up and get comfortable. Everything about J.D. was designed to push people away - from his tattoos to the sharp lines he trimmed at the edges of his beard. He was hard, he could cut, but I had a feeling there was a hell of a lot more than that to him.

And Cody was his mirror image. Everywhere J.D. was hard, she looked soft. I also knew she wasn’t. She might give the impression she was fragile, but that girl was made of steel. Combined, they were an impressive pair. They fit in a way I couldn’t quite figure out.

Granted, the same was true of her and Ty. He was sexy. She was beautiful. When I’d left them dancing, my last thought had been that they might be the most beautiful couple I could imagine. No one would be surprised if they ended up together. My only question was how I fit into all of this.

Because next to J.D. I was a nice little boy from Iowa. Compared to Ty, no woman would ever look at me. Never mind that Cody had just assumed I was gay! Now, I was stuck trying to figure out if this whole thing between us was just some pity date, or if I really had a chance with her. Then again, she’d kissed me earlier like she’d meant it.

“What?” J.D. asked, clearly seeing something on my face.

“What if I’m the pity fuck?” I asked.

He cackled at me like some kind of wicked witch. “No! Fuck no, Tanner. She’s just a rookie. Cody knows what she wants and isn’t afraid of chasing it, but she just hasn’t experienced it all yet. Doesn’t mean she’s scared of it. Just means she’s a rookie.”

That was when I finally figured out why he'd latched on to that term, and damn, if it didn't fit a little too well. Cody was innocent in some ways. Not because she wanted to be, or insisted on it - or even because she assumed she had to be. She was just new to a few things, and she was doing her best to chase it all.

Calling her a "rookie" was a lot nicer than saying "virgin" or "prude" or any of the other words people used to describe women. Guys got a different set, which might be even more insulting. J.D. had circumvented all of that by labeling her a rookie, naming himself her mentor, and then deciding he'd teach her, well, everything.

"I just don't wanna push when she's not ready," I admitted. "And truth be told, J.D., I'm not sure she's feeling it. I mean, sometimes..."

He leaned in. "Oh, I want the juicy gossip."

I huffed, but it was mostly a laugh. "Earlier, she kissed me like she wanted to rip my clothes off. Other times, she gets nervous and shy. All I'm saying is I like her enough to not be chasing a fuck, ok?"

He reached over and dropped his hand on my arm. For a split second, my pulse picked up. I almost glanced around to make sure no one noticed, but this wasn't that kind of touch - and yet it was. It also made it clear J.D. was very good at playing this game in public.

"Look, I'm not even gonna try to pretend that I'm not head over heels for that little Missouri girl," he told me. "I also know she spent quite a few hours with me talking about your pretty eyes, how you have the best abs of the three of us, and that she didn't know what counted as a big dick." His fingers gripped just a little tighter, then he pulled his hand away. "She's into you. She's really into having a little attention."

"And Ty gives it to her," I reminded him. "That guy is the hottest in the PBR, and he's chasing her. Remind me again why she'd be interested in me? I mean, unless it's a pity fuck - which is pretty much how this all started out."

“Nope,” he countered. “Ty chased her. Ty got her in bed - so be prepared for him to act like his head’s up his ass for a bit. But you? You talked to her. You act like she belongs here. Not like you’re trying to convince her that she does. Plus, she knows you didn’t out her that first day.”

“Was kinda hoping none of y’all would notice her,” I admitted.

J.D. grinned. “Sorry ‘bout that. But trust me, she’s into ya. She just doesn’t know how to act on that, so you give her a way, and I bet you’ll figure out that our little cowgirl...” His eyes jumped over my shoulder. “... Is gonna make me work for it next weekend.”

The change in subject was enough to let me know that Cody was headed this way. Turning, I saw Ty with his arm draped casually across her shoulder, just like they were old friends and nothing more. Cody also had a little flush to her skin, and her eyes were sparkling like she was having the time of her life.

“Shoot whiskey with me,” J.D. told her.

Cody headed to the table and grabbed a shot. Lifting it up, she waited for J.D. to tap his little glass against hers, and then they both tossed them back together. The best part of that was how she didn’t wince or cringe at the burn of it. Nope, that girl shot whiskey with the best of them.

Which was one more hint that J.D. was right. My problem was that I kept thinking of her like a girl. Yes, she was a woman, but all the things I’d been taught about talking to ladies didn’t really apply to her. What I needed to do was treat her the same way I did J.D. After all, she was his rookie, right? And if I thought about that with the new definition, it gave me even more confidence with her.

“Hey, beautiful,” I said, getting out of my chair just to offer it to Ty. “And I meant her,” I assured him before reaching out a hand to Cody. “I’m not ready to pass you off yet.”

She nodded at me and accepted my hand. “Don’t worry, I can handle all of ya.”

Ty leaned his head back and laughed, which was when she realized what she'd said, but I didn't give her the chance to take it back. Nope, I tugged her up against my side, wrapped my arm around her waist, and guided her back to the dance floor.

"Think so, hm?" I teased. "Because that sounds like fun to me."

Her cheeks were getting darker, but she refused to look away. "I don't even know how to respond to that."

"You say, 'Yes, Tanner, I would love it if you come back to my room later tonight. I plan on ripping off all my clothes and jumping on you,'" I joked.

But damned if that pretty little blonde didn't lift her face, ignoring her bright pink cheeks, and tell me, "Yes, Tanner, I think you should invite yourself back to my room and throw me in a bed, then have your way with me."

"Your wish," I swore, "is my command."

And then I caught her mouth with mine and kissed her, making it very clear I'd meant every single word.

CHAPTER 8



I WAS DOING THIS. From the moment Tanner kissed me beside the dance floor, things had started to heat up between us. I was pretty sure it had a bit to do with Ty and J.D. being honestly ok with this. The way Ty had laughed at my unintentional joke? That had been the approval my mind really needed.

Another shot of whiskey with J.D., plus one more beer, had me feeling invincible. When the other bull riders started taunting me to get a little closer, grab Tanner's balls, and those sorts of things, I decided it was time to call it a night. The kind that ended in my bed. Tanner promised me he liked that idea a whole lot.

The drive back home was filled with a lot of silly flirting and bad innuendos. Tanner also held my hand on the console in the middle. When we made it to the hotel, he parked J.D.'s truck in the same place where he'd found it, then hopped out and hurried around to my side. I'd already made it down to the ground before he got there, though.

So Tanner just pressed his hand against that spot in the small of my back and directed me inside. He walked just a little too close, I kept looking over at him, and it was nice. I was doing this. This was ok. More than all of that, my mind was stuck on the fact that he really, truly, and honestly wanted me.

Once we made it inside, he moved around behind me. His hands stayed on my waist. I could feel his strong chest pressed up behind me. We reached the elevator and he leaned around

me to press the button before I could. That put him closer, so he kissed my neck as we waited for the car to arrive.

I had my head tilted to the side when the doors opened. An older couple stood there, looking at us like we were disgusting. The old lady sniffed in disapproval even as we moved out of the way. Her husband just glared at Tanner. Then once they were past us, the woman mumbled something about “loose morals.”

“Bitch,” I shot back as Tanner pulled me onto the car and pressed the button for the second floor.

He laughed, and then turned into me. “This version of Cody Lane is fucking hot,” he said.

I leaned back against the wall as the doors closed. “Yeah?” I asked, lifting my chin.

Obediently, he stepped into me just as the car moved. Both of his hands found my face, and before I knew it, we were kissing again. Damn, I liked that about him. He focused on my face. Not trying to grab my tits or ass. Nope, Tanner held my face as he plundered my mouth, making me feel like he was chasing *me*, not just a woman.

So I grabbed his shirt and pulled. I meant to drag him closer. In reality, I tugged the bottom from his pants, which gave me the chance to get my hands inside. His moved down to my neck, his thumbs holding me where he wanted, and the only reason either of us stopped was because the door dinged to announce our floor.

“And now I’m hard,” he breathed.

I skipped around him and off the elevator. “That sounds like a promise.” Pulling the keycard from my back pocket, I kept walking backwards, wanting to see how that looked in his jeans.

Tanner left the elevator and then stopped to give himself a little adjustment. My eyes dropped to follow his hand, and yeah, my heart started beating faster. I may have seen him naked before, but this was different. It felt like the kind of seductive tease that never happened to girls like me. When

Tanner returned the inspection before stretching his legs to catch up, I was sure I wanted this.

So I squeaked and spun, jogging down the hall towards the room I'd claimed as mine. It was the last one at the end of the hall, which had seemed like a great idea at the time and now seemed too far away. Even better, Tanner was chasing after me. I barely made it to the door before he wrapped his arms around me and started kissing my neck again. I fumbled with the lock a few times before I actually got it to work, and then we were inside.

Immediately, Tanner turned back to flip the panic lock. Next, he pulled the card from my hand and tossed it on the closest dresser. The look in his eyes had changed from playful to something different. Something hungry, and I could already feel my panties getting damp.

“You drunk?” he asked as he made his way closer.

I retreated, heading for the first bed. “Nope. Maybe a little looser, but not even tipsy.”

A smile curled his lips. “Lying?”

I held up my fingers a hair apart. “Almost tipsy.”

So he yanked his shirt over his head, tossing it behind him. “Now is when you say yes, Cody, because I really wanna get you out of all those clothes.”

My head was nodding even before he finished the sentence. “Oh yes,” I breathed.

Then he was on me. His hands found my shirt and pulled. I managed to duck out of it, and reached for the buckle of his belt. I popped that open as he got my bra free, and then had to let go of him to get my arms out of the straps. Immediately, Tanner started kicking off his own boots, but he reached for my belt.

While I worked on getting his pants open, he focused on mine. In the middle, we had to separate so we could get out of the last of our clothes. I sat on the edge of the bed to kick at my boots with my jeans and panties tangled around my ankles. He did a little bounce as he got his socks off, and then the pair

of us tumbled onto the bed together, both reaching for each other's mouth.

Tanner's hands found my ribs and then slid higher, not stopping until his palms passed over my breasts. My nipples were already hard, so he teased them, making me pull away to suck in a breath. That was enough for him to bend and claim one breast with his mouth. His tongue swirled around the tip. His lips sucked as his teeth held that tender skin where he wanted, barely touching me.

I grabbed at the back of his head, loving the way that felt, so he reached for the other side. Pinching one nipple, he sucked at the other, then changed sides. That pulled him halfway over me, so I managed to grab his ass, but I could feel his hard dick on the outside of my thigh.

Then Tanner moved lower. I tensed when he kissed his way down my belly, but he just looked up. "Trust me," he said softly before moving my leg over and settling between my knees. Then he kissed my inner thigh. His left arm reached up, sliding over my skin until he found my breast again. His right hand settled my thigh over his shoulder, and he pressed in.

His mouth was hot when it landed on my pussy. One swipe of his tongue parted me. Then he latched on to my clit and began to suck, flicking his thumb across my breast in the same rhythm. My toes curled, so Tanner sucked a little harder, working me a little faster, and I decided this was definitely good. My hips wanted to twitch, but he held me there, having his way with my body.

Sometimes he sucked. Other times, he teased me with the tip of his tongue. Occasionally, he pressed with the flat of it, and somewhere in there, I forgot to worry about anything else but gripping the back of his head and pressing myself closer to his face. That was when he gently slid two fingers deep inside me - and then curled them.

I moaned, not expecting that to feel so damned good. When he started pumping me higher, I stopped thinking completely. Pleasure. That was the only thing my brain could comprehend as he teased my breast, my clit, and my pussy at

the same time. He also wasn't gentle about it. No, Tanner abused me in the best way, demanding that I take every single thing he had to give.

Before I knew it, I lost control and came so hard my back arched off the bed. I clenched my jaw to keep from crying out with the intensity of it, and it felt like the waves of this orgasm were never ending. When I could finally breathe again, Tanner pulled back, trying to subtly wipe his hand on the blankets.

"Now that," he said as he stepped off the bed, "is a good look for you."

"Where are you going?" I asked, trying to scoot higher.

His eyes raked over me. "Condoms," he assured me as he reached for his jeans.

"Birth control," I countered.

"Disease testing," he tossed back, pulling out his wallet to retrieve a pair of foil packets. "And there may have been a threat about chopping off my balls. This is one time when sharing is not caring, Cody."

"Yeah," I agreed.

Because standing there like that, without any shame? Damn, Tanner looked good. His uniform in the arena did this man no favors at all. His legs were muscular in exactly the way I liked them. His abs were so impressively defined. And when he went to roll the latex onto his dick, I couldn't miss the way his arms flexed, showing off some very nice biceps.

Never mind that dick.

Tanner's had a bit of an arc to it, pointing up. It also looked a lot bigger from this angle, although it was hard to compare sizes from memory. It fit him, though, and when he stroked the condom to check that it was secure, his hands flexed, showing all the tendons on the back of them.

"I half expected you to be shy," he said as he moved to the bed.

"Shy?" I asked.

He crawled onto the bed, hooked my hip, and flipped me over onto my stomach. “Yeah, the kinda girl who looks away instead of seeing what she just caught.”

Then he shoved his arm under my belly and guided me onto my knees. I loved the way he just moved me around, putting me exactly where he wanted. It was sexy, and I couldn't help but press back into his dick.

Tanner growled his approval before leaning me up and back so he could kiss the side of my neck. “I'm gonna make ya come again,” he warned, his voice deeper and breathy. “You're gonna hold on to me and enjoy every second.”

I twisted just enough to see him, and his mouth found mine, cutting off the bad joke I was about to make about counting to eight. I also didn't care, because his other hand slid down my belly to find my clit again. Pinned up against him like this, every twitch of my hips was obvious, but so was his dick throbbing against the crease of my ass.

Then he pulled back, pausing for only a second before I felt him right there. His hand was driving me to distraction as he pushed in, filling me slowly. I could feel my body stretching around him. I wanted to jerk and buck with the tormenting of my clit, but the arm across my chest made that almost impossible. Then Tanner began to rock.

Holy shit.

When he pressed back in, he hit all the good spots. Every single one. I whimpered, unable to do anything else, and he thrust a little deeper. I rocked back to take even more, earning a moan of approval, and I liked that sound. Together, we began to move, his hand driving me higher quickly.

I felt like I couldn't keep enough focus to stay on my knees, so I reached back. My arm found his hip, and I pulled, making it clear I wanted more. Tanner gave it. Over and over, he thrust into me, grinding his finger over my clit hard enough to make me gasp. It felt good, just right. A little crazy and definitely nothing like I'd tried before, but I wanted wild. I longed for passion. I dreamed of the frenzy of losing control, and he was giving me all of that.

Our hips slapped together. Our breath came harder each time we connected. I moaned and he grunted, needing no real words to make it clear we both liked this. Then, he slid his other hand down and began teasing my breast, and I knew I couldn't take much more.

Tanner didn't seem to care. His hand moved even faster on my clit. The other pinched my nipple, tugging at it just enough to keep me where he wanted. His hips just kept moving, pressing into that spot that felt so fucking good, and the only thing keeping me in place was my arm grabbing onto him.

I could feel the pleasure growing. It was like a pressure in my belly, deeper and different than the intensity of his mouth. I wanted it, so I bucked back to take him even deeper. Tanner let go of my breast to grab my hip, and then he let himself go.

Hard. Fast. He fucked me the way I'd never known I wanted to be fucked. The bed creaked. The sheets were a mess. Outside our room, I could hear voices in the halls, and there was traffic on the street, but nothing mattered except this. When the headboard began to bounce, just bumping the wall, I didn't even care. Let the guys next door hear.

This was me. This was wild. This was everything I deserved, and the man giving it to me was everything I'd hoped for. Tanner buried himself in me again, and I reached up, over my own shoulder, grabbing his to hold him against me. The next thrust was all I could take, and my climax hit hard.

I sucked in a breath, feeling my body clench around him, but Tanner kept going, kept fucking. I came. His mouth found my shoulder. His hips pressed up hard against my ass with each thrust as the intensity of this took me. I wanted to scream. I also couldn't quite manage because this felt so fucking good, and each time he buried himself inside me made it last just a little longer.

Until he groaned deeply and thrust one last time. I could feel it. He throbbed. His breath caught, and just as I was coming down, Tanner found his own release in my body,

holding me against him so tightly, almost like he never wanted to let go.

“Fuck,” he finally panted.

“Mhm,” I agreed.

A chuckle slipped from him as his arm loosened around my chest. I shifted my hips, sliding off of him, and Tanner helped to ease me down on the bed. Then he climbed off the side and headed into the bathroom to get rid of that condom. When he came back, he paused at the foot of the bed to look me over.

“We still ok?” he asked.

I grabbed at the covers, pulling them back in a clear invitation for him to climb in. “You’re staying, right?”

So he headed to that side of the bed. “Yeah.” He climbed into the bed, then pulled me towards him, managing to help me under the covers at the same time. “And I don’t just mean tonight, Cody.”

I quickly glanced up to see those pretty eyes of his watching me. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not in bed with you because I need a beard,” he said. “Nor is it because I’m trying to get J.D.’s attention. I would like to point out that I came to that stacking party because I wanted to get a chance to talk to this amazing woman I’d just met.”

“Me?” I asked.

He nodded. “You. I just didn’t expect to see J.D. in a soaked pair of jeans. I also thought I was being pretty blatant that I was into you, so I still don’t know how you went from me flirting to me being gay.”

I groaned and pressed my face into his chest. “Tanner, I expected everyone at the PBR to try to chase me off. This?” I paused to trace lines in his amazing chest. “Not in a million years. I thought you were just being nice, and it was, well, nice.”

“I was trying to get up the nerve to ask you out,” he breathed.

“Instead, you kissed J.D.,” I pointed out.

“Mhm.” He turned to kiss my hair. “And then kissed this sexy woman in front of the entire world on TV. So, do I have a chance for another date?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And more kisses. Lots more.”

He just rolled me onto my back and obeyed. When my arms wrapped around his shoulders, I decided that I could definitely get used to this. I also never wanted to stop.

CHAPTER 9



SOMEWHERE IN THE middle of the night, Cody and Tanner decided to have round two, or maybe three. I couldn't quite be sure how many they'd had before we got back from the bar, but from the silence, I was pretty sure they hadn't just been talking. The rhythmic groan of their bed creaking, along with her tiny little sounds of pleasure, were barely audible, but it was enough to get my ass out of bed.

Staggering across the darkened room, I found my bag, dug in the front, and pulled out my vape. Taking a long hit off that took almost instant effect, easing the aches that had kept me up this long. But when I headed back to my bed, I heard Ty shift onto his back.

"Gimme a hit of that," he said, thrusting an arm out.

I pressed my vape into his hand. "You hurting?" I asked.

He didn't say anything until he huffed out a cloud of cannabis smoke. Then, his answer was simply to point to the room Cody was in.

"Man, she deserves that," I reminded him. "Don't tell me you ain't done the same."

He paused for another hit. "Sounds like she's enjoying it," he finally said.

I snagged my vape from his hands. "Thought you were ok with this."

Ty just groaned and sat up, turning so his feet were off the bed, facing me. "Fuck, J.D.," he grumbled. "How the hell am I

supposed to make this work? He's her boyfriend. You're her mentor. Me? I'm the guy she turned down. So, what? Am I supposed to ignore her all weekend?"

Ok, yeah, he kinda had a point. "We'll figure it out," I promised.

He grunted, making it clear he wasn't buying that. "Only way this is going to work is if Tanner's not ok with me."

"Or if you're still trying to get her," I countered.

"Which doesn't explain why I'm not fucking every buckle bunny at every bar in every town," Ty said. "And that's the shit I had to deal with tonight. Fuck, she was hot, too. Sexy brunette that looked like one of the buckle girls just walked up and offered to buy me a drink."

"And you like the bold ones," I realized. "Kinda explains why Cody has her claws in you."

"Mhm," he agreed. "Know what the craziest thing is? From St. Louis to Lincoln, I expected her to sleep, or read, or do something to keep herself entertained."

"And you ended up talking the whole way," I realized.

He nodded, bobbing his head in the darkness. "So how the fuck do I walk this line? Because I damned sure am not giving up. I have no interest in fucking over Tanner, either. Not if Austin's looking for a reason to make his life hell. I also think Cody deserves this."

"And?" I asked.

"And what?"

Because he'd left out one big thing. One kinda important thing. "And you like tag-teaming girls, Ty," I said. "Fuck, you and Renato used to make a game of it, so don't act like this isn't a good deal for you too."

"Not into guys," he reminded me.

I groaned and took another hit. When I blew that out, I was right back at it. "Never said ya were. Just means you enjoy

threesomes. C'mon, we've all done it. We just don't talk about it."

"And sounds like you and Tanner had a moment," he reminded me. "A hot little one that got Cody going."

Tossing my vape onto the nightstand between us, I flopped back into the bed. "Shit, I'm fucking high now, but yeah. I shoved him against the wall. He shoved me against the wall. We traded some spit, and Cody walked around the corner. Fucking about gave me a heart attack too, because it coulda been anyone."

"Man, you gotta be careful with that," Ty said. "You know half your sponsors would drop you in a heartbeat."

"No shit," I agreed. "Kinda the same with Cody, though."

"Huh?" Clearly, he wasn't keeping up.

"Cody," I said. "If she's fucking three guys at the same time?"

"Yeah, but we all do it," he pointed out.

"She doesn't have a dick," I reminded him. "You know as well as I do that if she says she's dating three guys, that's gonna cost her bad. Never mind the shit we'd get. Even if she didn't say what guys, it'd still make it impossible for her to keep going."

"So we should stop this," Ty mumbled.

"Fuck that," I shot back. "When the fuck have we ever done what we're supposed to?"

That earned me a chuckle, and then Ty eased himself back onto his bed. "Think Doc Stephens would say I got something?" he asked softly.

"Like, from a buckle bunny?" I asked.

"Would explain my lack of fucking," he pointed out. "Couple of weeks to clear it up, and a little more hesitation afterwards."

"Naw, don't do that," I told him.

“Just hear me out,” Ty said. “All I need is something to make everyone think about it. A bottle to open when the wrong person’s looking. Or to swallow a damned aspirin, you know? Have you say something about sticking my dick where it don’t belong, and you know those guys will run with it. I’d never even have to confirm it.”

He actually had a point. “And when Cody asks?” Because that was the only problem with this plan.

He chuckled. “Then I tell her that it seems the guys noticed me not sleeping around and came up with their own reasons.”

I had to give it to him. That might just work. There was just one more issue with his whole plan. “You sure you don’t have anything?”

“Always use condoms and have no symptoms,” he said. “Was thinking about getting tested, just have to figure out how to do that if we won’t be around to get the results. They usually don’t like giving those out over the phone if there’s something positive, and telehealth can’t draw blood.”

“True,” I relented, but a little idea was starting to form. “Something to worry about in the morning.”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “Because they’re done, and that shit hits hard.”

Yeah, it did. My body was no longer hurting, and Cody was probably a very happy girl right now. Plus, I was a little proud of Ty. I’d half expected him to lose his shit, say he was done with her, or have some other bone-headed tantrum like that. Instead, he’d jumped right to making this work, and in a way that wouldn’t fuck our girl over.

It seemed that some old dogs could be taught new tricks.

That was my last thought before sleep took me, and I slept hard. When my armageddon alarm went off the next morning, Ty groaned and pulled the second pillow in his bed over his ears. I silenced the thing, but once I was sitting up, I was too awake to go back to sleep. So, I decided to get my damned ass in gear.

Cody had a meeting with sponsors today. I needed to head over to the arena. I couldn't check in yet, but the sports medicine guys should be there. But first, a shower, because I smelled like a bar, and not in a sexy sort of way. Then, afterwards, I wanted to have a nice little meeting with Max, which meant we'd need one of the rooms. I figured this one would be better - because it wouldn't smell like sex. I also really didn't want to do this around anyone else, but I'd figure it out.

An hour later, I'd sent Ty to wake Cody up, got my keys back from Tanner, and was heading to the arena. It was a straight drive this time, and one I knew a little too well. Cheyenne, Wyoming, was the heart and soul of rodeo. The outdoor arena was a massive thing. It might not hold as many fans as some of the convention centers we used, but the amount of dirt out there often gave the bulls ideas.

Sure enough, when I pulled into the parking lot, an entire army of people were hauling around panels and setting up tarps to make this place into our own. I aimed for one of the buildings at the side, which was attached to the stands in a round-about sort of way. But when I reached the first door, someone was there to stop me.

"Authorized personnel only," the guard said.

"I need to talk to Dr. Stephens," I told him.

"Dunno who that is." He stood a little taller like he was ready for me to start shit.

Thankfully, that was when Anthony stepped out of the door behind him. "Hey, J.D.," he greeted me.

"Is the doc in?" I asked. "Security doesn't wanna let me pass."

"It's ok, Owen," Anthony said. "He's a rider. I'll take care of him."

"We're not supposed to let anyone in," the security guard pointed out.

"Cept the authorized ones," Anthony told him. "I promise the top rider in the PBR is authorized."

That was enough to get Owen to move, so I slipped past, and Anthony jerked open the heavy metal door to let me in. Even better, he followed right after. Neither of us said anything until we reached the hall beyond.

“Local guy?” I asked.

“Mhm,” Anthony agreed. “Dumber than a box of rocks too.” Then he turned into yet another room. “Hey, Doc? J.D.’s here.”

“What the hell did you do this time?” Dr. Stephens asked as he came around the corner.

“I’m not playing with his feet until tomorrow,” Anthony said before turning around and just walking his big Black ass right back out.

“I’m not giving you narcotics,” Dr. Stephens told me.

“Still vaping weed,” I assured him. “Works better than your damned pills, too. I actually came for something that isn’t exactly sports medicine.”

The physician who toured with the PBR looked me over, then waved me in so he could shut the door behind me. “What’s going on, J.D.?” he finally asked.

“Well, I’m wondering if we can get STI testing through you. Seems like it’s a little hard when we’re always on the go.”

“Symptoms?” he asked next, turning for a large crate that was still mostly packed.

“No,” I groaned. “I kinda met someone.”

“This week,” he mumbled.

For anyone else, that would’ve sounded like he was calling me out. This, however, was the one doctor who actually knew us inside and out. The man had been patching me up for years, and I was pretty sure he knew me better than my mama by now.

“Two someones,” I clarified.

“That’s more like it,” he said.

I pulled in a breath. “And all of this is confidential, right?”

“To a point,” he admitted. “You signed a release that allows me to inform the press of your general status.” He turned back and must’ve seen the look on my face, because his entire demeanor changed. “Shit, it’s confidential,” he promised.

“A guy and a girl,” I told him. “And kinda another guy. Now, we wanna make this something serious, which means making sure we’re all clean first, right?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” he agreed.

“But getting those tests?” Then something else dawned on me. “Shit, and Cody’s gonna need birth control!”

“And now I know the girl,” he informed me.

I just ducked my head, pulled off my hat, and shoved a hand into my hair. “Doc, I’m fuckin’ this up, aren’t I?”

“Sit down,” he ordered, pointing me at a cheap plastic chair in the corner. “J.D., the fact that you’re here, talking to a doctor, means you aren’t fucking this up. Now, this little meeting has nothing to do with your condition or anything the press needs to know, so how about you lay it out for me?”

While he talked, Dr. Stephens was pulling out an assortment of things. The only part I recognized was the test tube - no, tubes. Everything else was more of his crazy shit that seemed to always make us better. So, while I watched, I started talking.

“I’m bi. Started dating guys when I was like seventeen. Not the kind of shit I can say around here, though, so I’ve been keeping it on the down-low. Well, then Cody arrived, and I’ve been mentoring her. But, seems she’s good at making things work out, because somehow, we’re trying to do this poly thing without anyone knowing, and she’s a real good girl, so none of us wanna end up giving her something that’ll fuck up her life.”

“What are you doing now?” he asked. “And push up your sleeve. All the way up.”

I obeyed, shoving my t-shirt sleeve as high as it would go. “Condoms.”

“Good man,” he told me as he wrapped a strip of latex around my bicep. “The others?”

“Same,” I promised, watching him screw a funny little yellow tube to something else. “And the other guy? Well, the guy I wanna fuck? Yeah, hasn’t really made it there yet.”

“So tell Tanner and whoever this other guy is,” he said as he uncovered a needle and lined it up with my vein. “Stick.” Then he pushed the tip into my arm, and kept going. “That all four of you need to come in and get your blood drawn. I can get this expedited, which means we might have the results by Sunday.”

“This is for STI testing?” I asked.

He pressed one of those test tubes into the yellow thing, and I watched as my blood filled it. “For you, yes. For Cody, I’ll also run a pregnancy test so that I can legally handle her birth control. I’ll also need her to tell me which kind she prefers. I’m able to prescribe it, but I’m afraid I’m not up to date on all the latest stuff. I’ve been working with nothing but men for a few years now.”

“And then?” I asked.

He switched out test tubes to fill a second. “What do you mean?”

“When we get the results,” I said. “Won’t someone wonder what’s going on?”

Dr. Stephens pulled out the second tube, pressed a piece of cotton over my arm, and then removed the needle. “No, J.D., they won’t. I send out drug tests, STI tests, and more all the time. You boys keep getting yourselves in shit, and I keep doing my best to patch you up.” Then he dropped a band-aid over the cotton. “But I should let you know that if they come in to get tested, I’ll know who all is involved in this mess you’re making. I can already guess Cody and Tanner, just from the ordeal last weekend.”

I nodded slowly. “And Ty McBride.”

“Shit,” he breathed. “Yeah. Send him here today.”

All I could do was laugh, because it seemed Ty’s reputation really had preceded him. “Promise, Doc.” Then I yanked my shirt down. “Any advice for keeping this shit away from the rest of the tour?”

Dr. Stephens had already put the needle into a red box, and was now writing numbers on the test tubes. “J.D., there isn’t a damned thing wrong with not being straight. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Don’t mean the sponsors will agree, though.”

“Which means coming out isn’t an option,” he realized. “So, my next advice is to not do this. Cody Jennings made a splash when she showed up. A lot of people are watching her. That means someone will notice who she’s spending time with, and questions will come up. Now, I’m not about to ask you which one of those guys might not be straight, but you need to think real hard before you put him in a position to choose between his career and getting laid.”

“So your best advice is to not do this,” I said.

The man put my tubes of blood to the side, then stepped over to clasp my shoulder. “No. It’s to realize that some things hurt. I can only patch up so much. But, in my professional opinion, seeing you and Ty McBride stop fucking everything you see? That’s the healthier option. What I would tell Cody would be different, though, so make sure you’re not about to drag that girl down into the shit you always end up starting, ok?”

I nodded, making it clear I heard him. “But she’s my rookie.”

“And will this love of yours last more than a month?” he countered.

Yeah, I didn’t like him throwing out that word like that. “She deserves what she wants, Doc. And if that means we three guys have to suck up our egos, and maybe a little pride? Yeah, I’d say that’s the kind of thing that lasts a while. I’m

also not gonna let anyone tell her that she can't do the same shit the rest of us have been for years."

He nodded, accepting that. "Ok. Just know that when she gets hurt, I'm not letting any of you in to bother her. My first responsibility is to my patient. Right now, that's you. But when it's her turn, I *will* have Anthony haul your ass out of here. You hear me?"

"Yeah, Doc," I promised. "Just know that she's gonna replace me. Cody Jennings will be the best bull rider the PBR has ever seen, so we gotta make sure she has the chance to prove it. Everything else comes second."

"I'll take good care of her," he promised. "And I'll call you with those results, so don't come in here asking about them. It's all anonymous now."

I stood and offered the man my hand. "Thanks, Doc. We really don't deserve you."

"And yet I keep coming back," he joked as he accepted my hand and shook. "I want to see all of them before Friday night's over. I don't care how you make it happen, but do make it happen, J.D."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 10



TY BANGED ON the door between our rooms, waking up Tanner and me. While I headed to the bathroom to get cleaned up, Tanner was talking to Ty. Evidently J.D. needed his keys, and I had to get my ass in gear for a meeting with Max and some sponsors. Thankfully, they'd given me enough time to actually get pretty.

Once I was clean, had my hair braided, my face painted, and a nice pair of Fierce Denim jeans on, I was ready to go. Tanner pulled me closer to steal one last kiss, then sent me towards the door with a swat on my ass. I snagged my hat, settling it onto my head as I headed for the elevator, but when I stepped into it, seeing where he'd stepped in to kiss me so hard last night, I realized something.

I liked the guy.

Yes, he was cute. Yes, I'd been horny last night. According to J.D. and Shelby, those two things were all the reasons I needed to fall into bed with someone, and I was doing my best to not feel guilty about it. But at the same time, Tanner made me smile. Ok, I could also feel a little ache in my core that proved last night has been real - and I liked it.

Yet my mind was stuck on the little moments of our date that had made it amazing. From Tanner saying he respected me to watching him ride the mechanical bull, he was just a nice guy. The kind of nice that I didn't think really existed, and I wanted more of it. Compared to J.D.'s bluntness and Ty's flirting, it was a damned good balance.

Because the truth was I wanted it all. I wanted to be the tough girl that could keep up with J.D. I wanted to have someone be a little over the top as he tried to impress me, and Ty had that down. I also wanted a guy that I could just rely on, and that was where Tanner fit in. Maybe the chemistry didn't sizzle between us like electricity, but I felt like this was something different. It was there, just starting slow and growing each time we were together, learning each other a little more.

Never mind that those three guys had just tripled my experience with men. Well, doubled. No, tripled, because while I hadn't slept with J.D., he'd still taught me a lot just by being honest when we talked. Mostly by encouraging me. Making me feel a bit less like an idiot for actually wanting to be wanted.

I pulled out my phone and was about to send Shelby a message about it all, but the ride down was a little too short. I reached the first floor to find Max pacing in the lobby, looking at some paperwork in his hands. The guy was in his late thirties or early forties, and he had one of those bellies that would make Santa proud. Combined with the bare spot on the back of his head, his thick glasses, and the sweet smile that seemed to live on his face, he seemed harmless - although I had a feeling his brain was a little dangerous.

"Hey, Max," I said.

He turned and his smile grew. "And here's the hottest rookie in the PBR!"

"So, what am I supposed to do today?" I asked him as I closed the distance between us.

Max shifted his papers to his left hand, then offered me his right. I clasped it and he shook once before letting me go, only for him to gesture to a set of doors at the side. Together, we began heading that way.

"I'll handle most of this for you, but they may have questions. I'll want you to answer honestly, or at least not lie."

I looked over in confusion. "Uh..."

“Like if they ask about a subject that isn’t any of their business,” he clarified. “Boyfriends, as an example. Don’t say you have one if you don’t. Don’t say you don’t if you do. Telling them that you’d prefer to keep your private life private is fine.”

I nodded, because he had a point. “Ok. Because that’s probably a good call. I really don’t wanna talk about boyfriends.”

“Noted,” he assured me. “And we’re not signing anything today. This is just for a few companies that want to learn more about you so they can make their decisions. Easy stuff, Cody. Come off like the bull rider you are and they’ll eat it up.”

“Thanks,” I said just as we reached a pair of wooden doors.

Max opened the one on the right, and then gestured for me to go in first. On the other side, the first thing I saw was a large oval table. There were plenty of people in the room, but most were standing at the back. Belatedly, I realized that was where the coffee and snacks were.

“Afternoon,” Max told the group as he gestured for me to take the chair at the head of the table. “If you’d all like to have a seat? This is Cody Jennings, from Spring Creek, Missouri. She’s currently sitting at eighteenth in the world standings after only her second event with the Tough Enough series.”

I eased myself into the large, well-padded leather chair, aware that everyone else seemed to be wearing suits. Three of the representatives were women, but the rest were all men. Only Max and I were dressed casually, which made me feel a little bit out of place. I tried to convince myself this was expected, but it only helped so much.

“Cody?” a woman asked as she took the chair to my left. “Spelled C-O-D-Y?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I told her. “Named for Cody Lambert. My father was a rodeo bull rider, back in his day, and that was one of his heroes.”

She chuckled. “So you’re his best son, huh?”

I shrugged. “Well, my mom and older brother were killed in a car wreck when she was pregnant with me. That was the name they’d picked, thinking I was gonna be a boy, and he was too devastated to change it.”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled softly.

“Which is a great backstory,” said a man halfway down the table. “When did you start riding bulls, Ms. Jennings?”

“It’s just Cody,” I told him. “And I grew up mutton busting. I think I got on my first bull when I was in the ninth grade? End of that year or the summer right after. I don’t really remember.”

“Any other rodeo events?” another man asked.

I shook my head. “Daddy wanted me to do barrel racing like my mom, but we couldn’t afford a horse. So I went from sheep to calves to steers to bulls.”

“Her scores have been impressive too,” Max pointed out. “In St. Louis, she earned a ninety-one.”

“So did everyone else who didn’t get bucked off,” said a woman at the end. “Three of the stock contractors at that event have bulls competing for the year-end title. It was a hard string.”

“It was,” I agreed. “I still managed to stay on two of them, though.”

“But how long will you be able to do that?” a man asked. “No offense, Ms. Jennings, but this isn’t an easy sport, and Tractor Supply isn’t interested in investing in a rider who’ll spend most of the tour on the sidelines.”

“I’ve been doing it for most of twenty-two years,” I countered.

“And you’re a woman playing in a man’s world,” he reminded me. “Those men are bigger and stronger than you, and half of them still don’t last. What makes you think you’re different?”

I glanced over at Max, who was sitting to my right. He nodded, so I decided to just answer that. “All my life, I’ve

been told that I'm not good enough for this, Mr. Tractor-Supply," I said. "Know what? The ones who said it are still sitting back in Missouri talking about how they'll make it to the PBR one day, but I'm the one who's *here*. I also don't have to be anything like the guys, because I'm not one."

Halfway down on the left side, a man was reclined back in his chair, swiveling it slowly from side to side. "What do you mean, Cody?" he asked.

"I mean I ride like a girl," I told him. "My center of gravity is lower. In case y'all missed it, that means I have less to get slung around up top. My core's stronger because it's shorter, which means even less slinging to be done. Most of those guys' upper-body strength is good just because they're men. Me? I grew up tossing seventy-five pound bales of hay up to the top of the stack. I worked on it so I could hold on. I pushed myself. I also weigh less than most of those boys, which means the bulls can kick higher, earning more points for me, and I don't have to pull as hard, because my own weight isn't a liability."

"Nice," the guy said.

"So what are you all looking for from her to make your decisions?" Max asked. "Since you clearly wanted to learn about her."

"We're currently running marketing research to see how our consumers will take our endorsement of a woman in a man's sport," the first woman said. "That will be our determining factor."

"I want to see consistency," a man added. "She's only been to two events, so we're interested to see if she has staying power, or if she's going to burn out fast."

"Our main interest," the guy at the back added, "is to have our name on the stage at the end of the show. That means finishing in the top ten more often."

"I have a question," asked another guy. "Cody, are you married?"

"No, sir," I told him.

“Dating?” he asked.

Max lifted a hand. “She would prefer to keep her private life out of this.”

“But her availability is half her draw, isn’t it?” the guy pressed. “You put a cute blonde in with all those men, and the viewers are going to notice her. Since the majority of followers tend to be men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, what they’ll want is sex appeal. Are you interested in changing your riding attire, Cody?”

“To what?” I asked.

“Maybe more cleavage?” he asked.

I looked at him like he’d just lost his mind. “No! First off, I’m not losing the vest. I kinda like having my bones and organs in one piece, thank you very much. Never mind that my vest comes high enough to hide any cleavage. My shirts are meant to keep my skin attached, not ripped off with the dirt.” I looked them all over. “If you’re hoping I’m gonna ride in a bikini, then all y’all can fuck right the hell off.”

I pushed back my chair and was about to leave when Max grabbed my arm. “And that would violate your contract with Tillman, so it’s not going to happen,” he promised.

Letting out an annoyed sigh, I pulled myself back to the table. “Look. I’m not here to represent, or make history, or any of that shit, ok? I want a check. In order to get that check, I need to stay on a bull. That’s it. That’s all I’m offering. If your plans are to have a ton of horny idiots fapping to the PBR live stream, then I want no part of it.”

“I like her,” said the reclining guy.

But one of the women leaned over the table to catch my eye. “Cody, you realize this is going to be a lot of what you get, right?”

“Like talking about how I should be making apple pie?” I asked her. “Yeah, that was the reaction to waving at my dad in the stands. I was basically told to get back in the kitchen. I’ve been called a toy, a pretty little thing, and all of that. Don’t

care. They can say what they want about me. Don't mean I have to get up and go to the kitchen, though, now does it?"

"No, ma'am," she agreed. "It does not."

I nodded to make it clear we agreed. "I'm also wearing pink," I told the room. "Black and pink. I will be making the point that girls do it, I can cowgirl up as much as the boys, and I'm not stopping until the buckle on my belt is gold instead of silver."

"For winning the World Finals," Max clarified for the rest. "According to J.D. Adkins, she has the chance, too."

One of the men who hadn't spoken yet finally blurted out his question. "Are you a lesbian, Ms. Jennings?"

"Are you gay?" I shot back.

"My sexuality has nothing to do with this," he countered. "Yours does."

"No, it doesn't," I assured him. "I'm also not gonna tell you if I'm a virgin, how many people I've slept with, or my bra size." I reached up to scrub at my face. "Let me just make this very, very clear. If you wouldn't ask J.D. Adkins about it, don't you dare think of asking me, because the answer will be the same: fuck off."

"Ok," said the woman who'd spoken last. "So let me turn that question a bit. Cody, would you have a problem being sponsored by a company that takes part in Pride events, supports LGBTQ, Black Lives Matter, or other controversial alliances?"

"Nope," I assured her. "See, I don't have time for politics. I also know that it's none of my business. I'm just here to ride some bulls and show up the boys."

She nodded her head, then looked over and caught Max's eye. He nodded once before looking at the rest of the room. "So, for those of you wondering about her consistency, I'd just like to point out that there's only so much room on her vest, helmet, and chaps. Sponsoring a rider is a risk. Even the best can be dropped by a bull. So, just know that the final decision is Cody's, and at the rate she's been going, it won't be long

before the best you'll get is a tiny little sticker that won't show up on live TV." Then he reached over to rub my shoulder. "Any other questions?"

The reclining man lifted his pen. "I have one. Cody, how do you feel about Mike's Hard drinks?"

"Pineapple strawberry," I told him. "That's my favorite. I also like that you're selling it in those assorted boxes now."

"Good answer," he told me.

"Anyone else?" Max asked. When no one else spoke up, the man pushed himself to his feet, then offered me his hand. "Then I think Cody deserves to enjoy her last day off before things get exciting tomorrow. You all have my number if you think of any more questions."

And we left to a chorus of, "Thanks, Max," from most of the representatives in the room.

CHAPTER II



I MADE it back to the hotel just as Cody was finishing up her meeting with the sponsors. When I walked in, the doors to the elevator had just closed behind her. Max pulled out his phone and started typing a text before he turned, only to laugh when he saw me standing there.

“J.D.!” he said. “I was just about to let you know I’m free.”

“Same,” I said. “Can I take you to lunch or something, Max?”

His eyes narrowed. “I can get us a private room, or we can talk in yours,” he offered. “But I just had lunch, actually. Now, if you’re starving, I won’t turn down a beer.”

I nodded, debating that. “I’m mostly looking for privacy, and in a way that won’t bite me in the ass with someone hearing through a door.”

Max headed over to pat my shoulder and gestured to the front doors. “Well, my little car uses a lot less gas than your truck, and I know a nice little pub. I’ll drive and you can pay, hm?”

Turning with him, the pair of us headed out to the parking lot. Sure enough, Max was once again in one of those little economy things he always rented. I pulled off my hat and climbed into the passenger side. Before I forgot, I sent off a text to Ty, letting him know what Doc Stephens had said, and that he needed to get his ass over to the arena. His reply was a thumbs up emoji.

Max noticed me texting, but didn't ask. He simply headed right down the road, letting me do my thing. He didn't even bother getting on the highway, because after the first light, it seemed this pub of his was right there.

When we walked in, the place was mostly empty. The pair of us found a booth in the back, waited until the waitress had not only taken our orders, but also brought back two draft beers. Then, and only then, did Max decide to push the issue.

"This looks like one of those big problems," he said, keeping his voice down. "What's going on, J.D.?"

I slowly spun my glass between my hands, watching as the bubbles twisted in the middle. "Well, you've been real good to me for a real long time now, Max."

"Don't say you're firing me," he breathed.

"Hope not," I admitted. "It's just..." But my throat chose that moment to clench up.

Because this shit? Yeah, I hadn't ever come out to no one like this. My mama had kinda figured it out when I was little. My baby sister had outed me by accident, confirming it to her. Lookin' back, I was pretty sure neither one of them had ever really thought I was in the closet, so they hadn't seen it the same way I had. Still, besides Cody catching me, having to explain to Ty, telling Doc, and the guys I'd fucked, there wasn't another soul in the world that knew.

I also didn't know how to say it. Was I supposed to just blurt all of this out? Fuck, how'd I manage to tell Ty? Naw, that didn't count. It had been because of Tanner. Still, my guts were all fucked up, and I felt like my balls were in the back of my throat, but I could do this. I needed Max's help on this, so I *had* to.

"J.D.?" Max asked, sounding worried. "Look, if you're in shit, we'll figure it out."

I lifted both hands to drag them down my nose and mouth. "You know how sponsors have these ideas?" I asked, because that felt like the best way to start. "Welp, I'm not so sure I fit 'em, and, um..."

“And they’re still paying you what you ask,” Max reminded me.

I nodded as I blew out a breath. “Max, I’m not straight.”

There. It was done. I’d thrown that out there, and now I couldn’t take it back. My eyes jumped up to Max’s face, only to find his brow creased and that childish smile erased from his face. Slowly, he began to nod.

“Ok,” he said. “So where’s the problem?”

Those words - and his honest confusion - made me feel like a million pounds just slid off me. “The sponsors,” I told him. “Shit, you think that’s gonna fly? Max, this is the PBR, and it don’t matter if a guy’s gay, bi, pan, or anything else. If he’s not boning the chicks every night, he’s not what they’re lookin’ for, get me?”

“Most of us aren’t ‘boning the chicks every night,’” Max reminded me. “And your love life has never been a part of your contracts.”

“Nope, but my reputation as the PBR’s bad boy is,” I countered. “C’mon, we both know how this game is played. Once I started gettin’ into shit, my vest filled up. The more punches I threw, the more money I made. This? Shit, if it gets out? They’ll all drop me for some reason that doesn’t have a damned thing to do with who’s in my bed.”

Max lifted his beer and took a polite sip. “You dating someone?”

“Workin’ on it,” I admitted.

“Congrats,” he told me. “A ‘he,’ I’m guessing?”

“They,” I clarified before waving him off. “It wasn’t supposed to happen, ya know? Like, I was just lookin’ out for her because she’s good. Ty stepped up, and I figured it’d all work out with them. Damn, but he’s crazy about her. And then one thing led to another, and we hit her hometown, and shit went down - “

“What shit?” Max broke in.

“Cody’s ex,” I explained. “Bastard fucked her to run her out of bull riding. Well, he and his buddies were all trying to slut-shame her, ya know? But those of us on her crew all stepped up, and then we all started talking, and next thing I knew, I was kissing a guy, and Austin was trying to spread rumors that he’s gay, and yeah.”

Max was slowly bobbing his head, but the look on his face made it clear none of that made sense to him. “So you’re dating Ty McBride?” he asked.

I scoffed at the insanity of that. “Naw. Ty’s with Cody.”

“J.D., if another rider is looking at the same thing, it’d be good for him to talk to his rep,” Max warned. “If he’s ahead of the game, we can make sure he’s covered.”

“He’s not a rider,” I said.

“How do I help?” Max asked next.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “Shit, I dunno, Max. I just know that I’m about done. I hurt more days than I don’t, and now that there’s someone who can show these idiots how to ride, I’m kinda hoping that maybe my time in the sun’s about over.”

“Cody,” he realized. “How does she fit in?”

“I’m her mentor,” I told him. “Thing is, I’d also really like to be her boyfriend too, and I think I got a real shot. But there’s a guy too.”

“What guy?” he asked. “Now, I’m not wanting you to out anyone, but if you want me to cover this up, I’m going to need to know.”

I grabbed my beer and chugged back half of it, hoping like fuck that Tanner wouldn’t kill me for this. “His name is Tanner, and he’s one of the bullfighters.”

“Tanner Burns,” Max said, proving he knew who I meant. “The guy who kissed Cody.”

“Because she wanted to make sure he had a beard, but he’s into her. They’re workin’ on a real thing - and I’m pretty damned sure he’s further in the closet than I am. I mean, my

mama and sister know. Him? Sounds like the other bullfighters know, and that's about it."

"Not going to breathe a word of it," Max promised. "I'm just curious how Cody got in the middle of this."

"Because we're bi," I explained. "And fuck, Max. Just look at her! You can't tell me that you didn't do a double-take the first time you saw her. This pretty little thing that's tough as nails and rides like she was born up there? Yeah, half the PBR was chasin' her from the moment she came off Disco Breakout. She just didn't realize it."

Max dropped his head and began to chuckle. "So you met the man of your dreams because you were both chasing the girl of your dreams?"

That made me laugh, but just once. "Yup, sounds 'bout like how it went down."

"Good for you," Max told me. "And a bullfighter? That boy might just be mean enough to keep up with you. So does Cody know?"

"Considering she's datin' Tanner to kinda take the heat off him? Yeah."

"Kinda?" he pressed.

"Well, I say kinda because she wants to jump on his dick."

"So she's not with Ty?"

"Oh, she's with Ty too," I assured him. "And Tanner. And I'm kinda workin' my way up, but I'm kinda freakin' out about fucking that up before I can get in good, ya know?"

"Boy, do I ever," Max assured me. "Asking out my wife was the scariest thing I'd ever done. I can't even imagine if she was dating someone else at the time."

That was enough to make me choke up again. Max said it like he meant every fucking word - and like he wasn't judging me at all. It was dumb as shit, but this man's easy acceptance of me - as fucked up as I was - meant a lot more to me than I would ever be able to explain.

I glanced away, but I could feel my eyes welling up. Trying to hide it, I chugged a bit more of my beer, draining the last of it. Then, the best I could do was stare out the window for a bit, trying to let my eyes settle back down.

Beside me, Max waved down the waitress. “My friend needs another,” he told her.

When she made it back with that, I pushed out a heavy breath, sniffed, and reached for the beer. What I didn’t do was drink it. Just holding it helped me get myself back under control.

“J.D.,” Max said gently, “I can’t imagine what this is like for you, ok?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“But you were there for me when the rest of the cowboys in the PBR laughed because I didn’t fit in. You pointed me at the people who I might get to sign with Tillman, and you had my back. Now, I really don’t care who you’re sleeping with, so long as it isn’t me, but there’s one thing you need to know.”

I cleared my throat. “What’s that?”

“You are the best damned bull rider the PBR has ever seen. Who you love doesn’t change that. Who you sleep with doesn’t either. Most of all, you had my back when I needed it, so I swear to you, J.D., that I will always have yours. If anyone comes after you for being bisexual, we’ll fuck ‘em up together, right?” And he lifted his pudgy fist over the table.

I tapped mine against it. “I’ve never come out to anyone before, Max. I’m kinda makin’ a mess of it.”

“You’re doing damned good,” he assured me. “I’m also very proud of you. I know this can’t be easy.”

I huffed out a laugh. “You’re makin’ it a hell of a lot easier.”

“Good,” he said. “So, I’ll go through your contracts and make sure I know them backwards and forwards. I’ll also keep an eye out for anything in Cody’s that could cause her problems. If one of the others has an issue, you send them my

way, and I'll do what I can. But, most importantly..." He leaned closer. "How the hell does this mess work for you? I mean, are you dating all of them too?"

Something about his honest curiosity and Max just being Max made me toss my head back and laugh. It was exactly what I needed, so I nodded my head, pushed my beer to the side and leaned closer.

"Well, we're all crushing on the girl. Cody doesn't really have a lot of experience, because guys don't like a woman meaner than them. I mean, 'cept us. Ty's about crazy for her, but he was going full stupid, and I had to back him off. And somewhere in St. Louis, I kissed Tanner, Cody caught us, and yeah. So, we agreed to all work on a thing, but we don't really know what the fuck this thing is."

"And Ty's cool with it?" he asked.

"Fuck," I grumbled. "Max, he's a Canadian. Ty's all liberal and shit. I mean, he tries to say he's not, but yeah. Like LGBTQ stuff, and race stuff? He's all about the equality. Kinda makes him cool, ya know? So when I tried to apologize to him, he cracked this joke about not being worried about me because I wouldn't just slip and fall in his ass."

Max chuckled. "Maybe you can push him to get a little more serious about his rides while you're busy not slipping, hm?"

I laughed. "Shit, that's Cody's job. She's about to put his ass to shame. And that girl?" I tapped my chest, right over my heart. "Man, she's fuckin' amazing. On a bull, off a bull, and all of it. She just needs someone to teach her how to give as good as she gets."

"I think she did that today," Max assured me. "But tell me about all of them, J.D., because this? It looks good on you, and I like to see my friends happy."

My eyes jumped up to see if he was joking, but Max was completely serious. He also had that childish smile back, and something about it made me feel like I was exactly where I needed to be, so I started talking. When my glass got empty,

Max ordered me another, and outside, the sun slipped down under the horizon, but that was ok.

Max got me. He was on my side. Together, we'd make all of this work, and fuck my sponsors if they had a problem with it. Because this wasn't really something I got to choose. I could hide it, I could fake it, but there was no way I could change who I loved - and I didn't fucking want to.

CHAPTER 12



WHEN I GOT BACK to my room after the meeting with the sponsors, Ty was headed out. He paused to give me a quick kiss, saying he had something to do real fast. When I asked what, he promised it was no big deal. Just a trip to the arena to check things out. It would only take a bit.

I was a little bummed, because I'd wanted to tell him about the sponsors. J.D. had disappeared too. The pair of rooms we had for the weekend were unnaturally quiet, so I sent off a text to Tanner, letting him know I'd had a nice time last night. Nice? Ha! That certainly did not do it justice, but it was the best I had.

Then, I flopped down on the bed and called Shelby. The phone rang and rang until I got sent to voicemail. That meant my best friend was probably working, so I left her a message, updating her on all of my insanity. No, I didn't tell her that Tanner and I had gone at it all night long, even waking up in the middle of the night to jump on each other. I did, however, tell her that my "official" boyfriend had taken me on a date that ended very, very well.

Then, needing someone else to talk to, I decided to call my dad. He should be at work, so I was going to just remind him that I rode tomorrow, I was fine, and all of the basic stuff. But to my surprise, he picked up on the third ring.

"Cody?" he asked. "Everything ok?"

"Dad!" I greeted him. "Hey, I was just gonna leave you an update. We're in Cheyenne, everything's good, and I ride

tomorrow.”

“Oh, I know,” he promised. “Gerardo and his boys are coming over so we can watch.”

“Dad!” I groaned.

“Now, don’t give me that,” he chided. “I gotta brag to someone. Oh! And your checks cleared. Cody, there’s a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in your account, so if you need something - anything - you got the money for it.”

“I’m fine,” I promised him. “I also just had a meeting with some more sponsors.”

“So this means you’re making even more money?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But Max took care of most of it for me. They just wanted to see me. I think to make sure I’m real or something.”

“Proolly,” he agreed. “Just don’t let those corporate guys push you into doing anything you aren’t ok with. You’re there to ride bulls, Cody. Not be a spokesperson.”

“I know,” I promised. “One of them was asking about showing more cleavage, and I told him off.”

“That’s my girl,” he praised. “You make them respect what you can do. And speaking of respect, how are things with that bullfighter you’re dating?”

I couldn’t help it. I giggled. “We had a real date last night, Daddy. I made him ride the mechanical bull.”

He barked out a laugh. “How bad was it?”

“Not too bad,” I admitted. “But then the operator decided to help out Tanner’s pride and gave me a free ride.”

“Oh-ho!” Dad laughed. “Yeah, just tell me you didn’t throw it to make that boy look good?”

“Nope, and I think I figured out how to spur with my short little legs,” I said. “And Tanner loved it. He also told them I’m with the PBR, so I guess there was a little bragging too.”

“Ok, I like that boy,” Dad admitted. “But what about those other two? J.D. still talking to ya now that you have a boyfriend? What about Ty?”

“Both,” I admitted. “And I rode from St. Louis to Nebraska with Ty, then from there to here with J.D.”

“And it’s ok?” Dad asked. “All on the up and up?”

“Yeah, it’s good,” I promised.

Because I hadn’t exactly told my father that I was messing around with all three of them. Yeah, that would be too weird. And while Dad had made me promise that I wouldn’t ride between events with the guy I was dating, well, that was impossible. The only people I knew well enough to catch a ride with were the three guys who all had agreed to kinda date me.

Thankfully, my dad had some pretty basic ideas of dating. He assumed that if I was with one guy, the others would back off. He also assumed they were all straight, so the mess with J.D. and Tanner would never cross his mind. Besides, I really did not want to talk to him about all the crazy nuances of that - let alone who I was sleeping with!

So I kept going. “And I’ll be riding in eighteenth tomorrow. That’s my world ranking now, Daddy.”

“Trust me, I know,” he promised. “I found the chart on that website that shows where you’re placing. They don’t have your picture on it, though. Not like the other guys.”

“Because I haven’t been in the Tough Enough series long enough,” I assured him. “I’m still surprised they got posters made of me.”

“And Ty bought a whole bunch,” Dad said. “We all got some now. But I should probably get back to work, honey. My boss is giving me the evil eye. You just make sure you wear that helmet tomorrow, ok? And stay out from under the bulls, because I got that photo album all ready to take with me if you end up in the hospital.”

I groaned. “Don’t you dare!”

“You get hurt and I sure am,” he joked. “No, just be safe, Cody. You ride good, and call me when it’s over - or text. I’ll be waiting and worrying, ok? I know that sometimes the hurtin’ doesn’t show up until after you’re behind the chutes. Just keep in mind that your old man’s gonna be over here worrying, and let me know if I can sleep that night, ok?”

“Promise, Daddy,” I told him. “Now stop being lazy. Oh, and tell Cole that my new boyfriend is amazing. I dunno, rub it in a little for me.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I think I can manage that.”

I ended the call with him and leaned back, a smile taking over my face. I had a funny feeling Dad would make a point of rubbing Cole’s face in it. They worked together, repairing diesel engines. Mostly, that was on the big rigs, but sometimes it was a tractor or such. And for the last few years, Cole had been telling his friends all about how he’d screwed me over.

Dad hadn’t said anything about it. He hadn’t told me that he’d known we slept together - or that Cole bragged about being my first. Nope, he’d let me live in ignorance until everything had blown up at the stacking party. Now I had to live with the knowledge that my dad knew about my sex life, so I wasn’t about to give him any more information. There were some lines that just shouldn’t ever be crossed.

Sadly, all of that didn’t take very long, and my room was still empty. So, to pass the time, I looked up the PBR’s website to see which bulls would be at our event this weekend. One of the sponsors had mentioned something about the awards for them. When I’d been riding with the PBR’s Touring Pro division, we didn’t have anything like that, so it meant one more thing to learn.

Yes, I knew some bulls were famous, but when reading over the website, I realized there was big money on the line for the Unleash the Beast competition. That scored the bulls on their performance over the season, ranking them the same way the riders were. It looked like the string in St. Louis had included a lot of the big names. No wonder we’d all eaten so much dirt.

I also recognized a few bulls on the list. Disco Breakout was currently in fifth. Without Ado sat right up at the top. That crazy beast had never been ridden to eight seconds, and he had a tendency to come after the riders once he got them on the ground. That was the only reason I wasn't upset about him bucking me off last weekend. However, he wasn't going to be here in Cheyenne, it seemed.

So I checked the names that would be, then looked up their past rides on YouTube. Some of them liked to spin to the right. Others to the left. Some were jumpers, others were known for their kicks. A few had some good tricks, but the biggest problem with this string would be the sheer power of these oversized animals.

When Ty got back, I was lying on his bed, still going through the videos. J.D. stayed out even longer, getting back well after dark with a bit of a buzz. He told us he'd come out to Max, just to make sure he was covered with his sponsors. Then he announced that he was going to the other side to grab a shower.

That was when I realized what time it was. Somewhere, in all of my research, the hours had just disappeared. So, deciding J.D. was right, I told Ty I was going to get cleaned up so my hair would have time to dry before passing out. He stole a kiss, and then my phone, only to start playing the next video on my list.

I didn't think anything about leaving the door open to the bathroom as I got the water heating up. Stripping out of my clothes, I kicked my boots off, feeling that little reminder in my core. Tanner hadn't taken it easy on me last night, and the feel of well-used muscles was enough to bring a smile to my lips. When I stepped into the shower and under the water, I was mentally replaying everything we'd done.

It felt weird, though. I was getting comfortable with Ty. Being around him was easy. I hadn't known him that long, but the casual way he kissed me, stealing something that was a bit more than a peck any time he wanted? I kinda liked it. J.D. was an enigma, though. He said he was into me. He'd kissed the shit out of me beside my truck when he'd visited my

hometown. He'd made a show of things back in St. Louis. Now, he was backing off again.

Tanner was a little more normal. He was also my official boyfriend, so we didn't have to hide anything. That made it easier in some ways, but also more embarrassing. The idea of him kissing me in front of Ty? How was I supposed to handle that? Should I kiss one, then the other, then the *other*? Granted, Ty hadn't cared when J.D. kissed me, but all of this? I was so far out of my depth.

But when I reached for the shampoo, I felt that ache again. It wasn't bad. It didn't really hurt. It was more of an awareness, but also something to keep in mind on the weekends. The last thing I needed was to have the sponsors all watching me, and for me to get bucked off because my pussy had been pounded, right?

I laughed at myself for even thinking about it. This was all so crazy. Me, the tomboy from the middle of nowhere, and this was all happening to *me*! Closing my eyes, I stepped under the water to rinse my hair, and heard the shower curtain. Wiping quickly at my face, I turned to find a beautiful, naked Ty stepping in to join me.

"Conserving water, right?" he teased, reaching for my waist.

I turned so I could keep rinsing, letting my eyes run over his body. "So, you think I should just share?" But after running my hands over my hair one last time, I moved so he could have the water.

"Yeah," Ty said, his voice just a little deeper as he moved to soak himself. "I also needed to get a view of you all wet and sexy."

I grabbed the conditioner and started working that into my hair. "I'm getting clean," I groaned, unable to wipe the silly smile off my lips.

Ty just stepped closer, sliding his hands from my ribs all the way down until he was cupping my ass, pulling me up against him. "Mhm." Then he pressed his half-hard dick into

my belly. “And this is just about the only time I can get you all to myself.”

“Not always,” I mumbled, thinking about that shower I’d shared with both J.D. and Tanner.

Ty just pushed me back a step, not even concerned with the fact that I hadn’t rinsed my hair out yet. “I’ll take what I can get,” he promised.

My back hit the cold plastic wall and I sucked in a breath. Ty immediately bent to claim my mouth, kissing me deeply. At the same time, his hands moved to my breasts, flicking his thumbs over my nipples. Yeah, I liked that, but all I could think about was the conditioner running down to my eyes.

“Ty,” I begged, pulling away.

He leaned back to look at me in confusion, so I stepped around him and into the water. “I don’t wanna be blind.”

“What the fuck, Cody?” he asked.

“Conditioner in my eyes,” I tried to explain.

He shifted to lean one shoulder against the wall, a smirk touching his lips. “Oh, so saying I should just bend you over instead?”

“Ty, we ride tomorrow,” I reminded him.

“Yeah?” He sounded confused.

I wiped water off my face, then stepped back into him. “The sponsors made it clear I have to score good.”

“Oh, you’ll score just fine,” he promised as his hands found me again. His mouth followed, kissing my wet neck.

“No,” I begged. “Ty, stop.” I tried to pull back.

The moment he felt me shift, Ty immediately let go. “What the fuck, Cody?” he asked again.

“I’m saying...”

But I didn’t get to finish because Ty huffed in frustration, turned around, and yanked the shower curtain open. Leaving me there sputtering out my explanation, the man stepped out,

snagged a towel, and didn't stop until he was out of sight.
Confused, I stared after him.

Then something in the room crashed.

CHAPTER 13



I QUICKLY FINISHED up my shower. Wrapping a towel around my body and another on my hair, I hurried out to see what the hell had just happened. The first thing I saw was Ty's bag against the far wall. A few of his clothes had fallen out of it, but he was pulling on a pair of briefs.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Oh, I should be asking you the same thing," he shot back. "I sat in here last night, listening to you fuck Tanner in the other room, and I didn't say shit, but when I make a move, you push me off?"

"What?" Because I'd had conditioner in my eyes. Never mind that he'd said he was ok with Tanner.

My mind was spinning. Ty looked pissed. Not a little annoyed, but like this was about to be a real big fight. The problem was that I didn't even know what I'd done wrong. One minute, everything had been great, and now this?

"I have waited a fucking *week*," he snapped. "Back in St. Louis, you didn't mind me being around, but as soon as we started traveling, you bailed on me to ride with J.D. You go out on a date with Tanner. Shit, then you fucked him all night long, and yeah, we could hear it, Cody."

"But you said it was ok," I reminded him.

"Yeah, it was all ok when I thought I'd be tag-teaming you with J.D.," he snapped. "Now I'm just the baggage. The guy you keep around for a little ego boost? What the fuck, Cody?"

“I don’t know what I did!” I yelled.

“You put me last,” he shot back. “I can’t even fucking hit on you unless we’re in our room, and when we are, you wanna talk about bulls, or scores, or sponsors. I’ve been trying, Cody. I didn’t say shit when you bailed on me to ride with J.D. I didn’t bitch when you got dressed up pretty to go out with Tanner. Shit, I didn’t even get pissed when you fucked him. I mean, you made me work for it, but him? You just fell into bed with him, and I fucking *let you!*”

“You encouraged me,” I reminded him.

“Because I didn’t realize I’d be the one sitting on the sidelines,” he roared. “I waited a whole day, but no, you don’t wanna fuck me anymore, is that it?”

“I ride tomorrow!” I yelled just as the door between our rooms opened up.

“What the hell?” J.D. asked.

Ty just pointed at him. “You stay the fuck out of this.”

“Like fuck I will,” J.D. told him, taking a step into the room.

Ty just braced up, turning to face him. “Well, if you want in the middle, fine. Maybe you can explain to her why I’m a little pissed about getting pushed off.”

“I had conditioner in my hair,” I reminded him, throwing up my hands.

“The last time you were in my bed?” Ty sneered. “Last Saturday. That’s a fucking week, Cody. Damned near. You think that don’t hurt a little? And I was patient. I gave you time to have your fun, but the moment I try to get a little of your attention, you push me off and say no? How the fuck am I supposed to take that?”

My mouth flopped open. “I wanted to talk!”

“Always just talk,” Ty grumbled.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” J.D. begged. “Dude, she’s got a point.”

“I told you to stay the fuck out of this,” Ty warned him.

“And I told you to fuck off,” J.D. shot back. He hadn’t, but that clearly didn’t matter to J.D. He also wasn’t scared of stepping in closer to Ty. “She don’t owe you a fuck, you dumbass. She’s not one of those rubber fuck-dolls. Shit, I got a fleshlight in my bag you can use.”

“Of course you do,” Ty grumbled.

I just pulled the towel off my hair and tried to ring out the water, hoping to figure out where I’d messed up. At the same time, J.D. dragged a hand over his face, then grabbed Ty’s shoulders, easing him down to sit on the edge of the bed. Oddly, that seemed to make Ty relax just a bit, almost like he was giving up.

“Bro,” J.D. said, “it’s different for girls, ok? You stick your dick in her, and it don’t hurt you none. You ain’t gonna pull a muscle or tear up your pussy, right?”

Ty huffed like that was the dumbest shit he’d ever heard.

“But,” J.D. went on, “it’s different for girls. Look, trust me, man. First time I had a dick in my ass? Yeah, I didn’t wanna sit on shit for a week. I figure it can’t be that different for girls. So while you might wanna work off a little steam, she’s thinking about how bad she’s gonna hurt tomorrow to make you happy.”

“Really?” Ty asked, looking over at me.

“I wanted to talk about it,” I admitted.

“Tanner fuck you up?” he asked next.

I opened my mouth to reply, but J.D. answered before I could. “You know he fucked her, and now you’re just being a shit because your ass is jealous. What the fuck did you think was gonna happen, Ty? That he’d get her all worked up so she’d fall on your dick?”

“Well, no...” he tried.

“Oh, so you figured you’d just get to double-tap her to get your kicks?” J.D. asked next.

“Fuck,” Ty grumbled. “Look, we haven’t even talked about that.”

So J.D. looked over at me. “Ty’s into the threesome, babe. Like, he gets off on watching a guy fuck a girl while she blows him. Or vice versa. Or maybe he just likes feeling another dick in her when he goes at it. That’s why he’s down with this.”

“What?” I asked, the word little more than a breath.

“One in the ass,” J.D. said, just as bluntly as ever, “another in the pussy. Grinding against each other while she gets off. Yeah, it’s hot. I mean, if you’re into butt stuff, but this dipshit hasn’t even thought about the fact that you’ve prolly never done anal. Hell, he’s convinced that every woman comes out of the womb knowing how to be a little sex kitten.”

“Fuck off!” Ty snapped.

J.D. patted his shoulder. “You’re moving a lot faster than she’s used to, man. Never mind that she just fucked the third guy in her life last night. You think you’re gonna move in right after like that’s not a big fucking deal for her?”

“It’s not like that,” Ty insisted.

J.D. just bent down to look right in Ty’s face. “So what is it like? Or were you just thinkin’ that you can’t remember the last time you’ve gone this long without gettin’ your dick wet, hm? Thinkin’ you’re being such a damned martyr, takin’ one for the team, because you had to go a whole week without a fuck? Think you can’t function unless you blow your load? Fucking *jack off*, Ty.”

Ty shoved at J.D.’s chest. “Like you’re any better.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m not the one tryin’ to make Cody into my own personal cum guzzler,” J.D. told him. “I’m the one lettin’ you and Tanner work shit out. I’m the one with my dick in my hand because she isn’t ready!”

“Guys...” I begged.

J.D. held up a finger at me. “Let the boys sort this out, honey.”

“Fuck you, J.D.,” I shot back. “In case you missed this, it’s my fight, not yours.”

“It’s ours,” he insisted. “Because that’s the only way this shit works, and Ty? Yeah, he’s got his head all fucked up, thinkin’ that because he can stand to piss, he deserves some shit. Hasn’t dawned on him yet that you deserve a little respect, and that maybe he’s trompin’ all over that like some spoiled jackass.”

“I found her,” Ty grumbled.

“Tanner did,” J.D. corrected. “And if you don’t think we all figured it out pretty fast, then you’re fuckin’ dumber than I thought.”

“And I’m not a thing to be found,” I said sternly. Because that line? Yeah, it was everything I hated about cowboys, and it pissed me right the hell off. “Remember when you were confused about why I didn’t *want* to fuck bull riders?” I asked. “Well, this is why. Because I’m not here to entertain you, Ty. I’m here to ride the bulls, not get ridden.”

“Well, yeah,” he agreed, “but...”

“No!” I snapped. “And so you know, I wanted to get the conditioner out before it could run into my eyes, and then I was *going* to ask you to be careful.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Because I need to score this weekend,” I went on. “I need those sponsors if I wanna stay on the tour. That means nothing rough. It didn’t mean no!”

“Oh.”

Deciding he was finally listening, I decided to just get it all out there. “And maybe it’s a little weird for me too, ok? I wanted to make sure you’re ok with this. That you didn’t think I was nasty for sleeping with someone else just a day ago before wanting you again. Or, I dunno. I mean, it’s just that...”

He pushed to his feet and made his way closer. “Don’t say slut,” he breathed. “Please, Cody, don’t even use that word.”

“But...”

He palmed the side of my face and looked down at me softly. “No, I just got hurt, ok? I thought that maybe I wasn’t keeping up, or that you were done with me.”

“Yeah, but Ty, you didn’t even give me a chance to explain,” I pointed out.

“That’s a guy thing,” J.D. said. “Cody, it’s easier to walk away so no one sees us hurtin’.”

Ty huffed and shrugged. “He’s not wrong.”

So I pressed my forehead into his chest. “I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“Shit,” he grumbled. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Cody. I didn’t mean it like that, ok? I didn’t even think about that shit J.D. said, about how it’s different for girls. I just...” He leaned back to lift my face up so he could look at me. “I don’t care who you fuck. Shit, you know I’ve had my fun. Doesn’t make you nasty to go from one bed into another. Hell, I don’t even care if you have some other guy’s cum all over you. I think you’re sexy, and sue me if I wanna get my hands on you all the time.”

“Yeah, but - ” I tried.

He kept going. “I’m also gonna try to remember that being on your side is a little harder than mine, ok? Because yeah, I do get jealous. I kinda like when you’re hanging all over me, and I’ve been real worried about this weekend, because I dunno how I fit in, and I kinda feel like I’m getting pushed out.”

“No...” I promised. “I’m trying so hard to give all of you time. It’s just... I mean... Ty, there’s only one of me!”

“And ridin’ comes first,” J.D. said. I looked up to see him backing out of the room. “Kiss and make up, you two,” he teased before slipping back to the other side and closing the door behind him.

Ty smiled at me. “Least I learned that you aren’t gonna put up with my shit, huh?” he asked. “I mean, we just had our first fight. Was a pretty stupid fight, and I was wrong, but I’m proud of you for speaking up.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

His thumb swept across my cheek. “Oh yeah. You’re also right. You need to score big this weekend, but maybe I can pull you into that bed and kiss on you a little.”

I tugged my towel off and stepped into him. “Oh, I think that’s a good idea.”

“Mm, you’re killing me,” he growled, letting his hands move down to my waist. “Because we’re gonna be real good tonight, Cody. I’m gonna take real good care of ya, ok? I just don’t wanna be forgotten.”

“You,” I promised, “are impossible to forget.” And then I pushed him back, not surprised at all when he pulled me down onto the bed with him.

CHAPTER 14



FRIDAY MORNING, we showed up at the arena long before the bull riders would arrive. Jorge wanted to walk the area to make sure we knew the spacing. Isaac was worried about the footing, since this place was open to the elements. A clod of dirt could be enough to get one of us down and hurt.

And me? I was still thinking about Cody.

The feel of her pressed up against me, the smell of her hair, the taste of her lips, the sounds she made when she came? Damn, I could get used to all of that. She was tough as fuck when she was on the back of a bull, but when she was in my arms? That woman became everything I wanted in a lady. She was soft, passionate, and didn't try to hold back at all.

Yeah, I also knew Ty was going to make me pay for that night with her. He wouldn't be able to help it. Hopefully, he'd keep it to a couple of snide comments, but I could never really tell with him. Guys like Ty McBride were used to always getting the girl. Rejection? It never happened to him. If he wanted someone, she usually came to him begging.

The three of us made a lap of the arena set up. This place was huge, with a race track around the outside of it, but the PBR had set up enough panels to block off a smaller section. That meant we wouldn't need to work as much room, and the safety riders would handle anything past the center line.

Jorge, Isaac, and I were in the process of making a basic plan for how we'd work everything when Dr. Stephens leaned over the edge of the dirt-side seats.

“Tanner!” he barked.

“Yeah, Doc?” I called back.

“I want to see you before check-in!” I glanced back to see him pointing right at me. “I need to check your shoulder.”

“Be there in five,” I promised.

“What the fuck?” Jorge asked, keeping his voice down so Doc wouldn’t hear.

I just shrugged it off. “I dunno. Maybe we don’t have an alternate?”

Isaac scoffed at that. “Would rather run with just two than some of those dumbasses.” Then he jerked his chin at me. “Go get checked. Except for the fact that this place is wider at the back, it’ll be no different than any other arena.”

“Minus the lights,” I pointed out. “We’re gonna have crazy shadows all over. Oh, and did anyone check the weather?”

“On it,” Jorge promised. “Here’s hoping the bugs aren’t too bad.”

“I’m getting bug spray,” Isaac grumbled.

I flapped my hand at the pair of them and headed for the exit. Right now, all the chutes were closed up, the bull gate was wide open, and the side doors led back to the outer buildings where the locker rooms and sports medicine were tucked away. I tried to remember which direction led to which one, but thankfully someone had been smart enough to put up signs for us this time.

Following the arrows to the sports medicine office, I wove through the chutes, the halls, and finally to a concrete room with a heavy metal door propped open. Stepping inside, I found the icing chairs we were all used to. Anthony was busy hooking up power and hoses to each of them. At the sound of my steps, he looked up.

“Hey, man,” he greeted me.

“Hey,” I replied. “Doc around?”

He pointed. “Everything ok?”

“Yep,” I promised as I headed to find Dr. Stephens.

Sure enough, the man was inside the room with all of his medical supplies laid out around him. I cleared my throat, making him look over. The doctor simply waved me to a seat, then headed over to close the door behind me. Now I was completely confused.

“What’s going on, Doc?” I asked.

“Roll up your sleeve,” he told me as he headed back towards his equipment. “I had a man come in here and say he’s in a relationship with you. He told me you’re all working on the same girl, and that everyone needs to be tested for STIs.”

I groaned. “And?”

Dr. Stephens glanced back, confusion on his face. “And I’m going to draw your blood and send it out. Should have results back by Monday. You boys keep getting busted up in the arena, and that means blood. These things can be transferred by blood, so it’s my duty to have you checked.”

“Uh huh...” I drawled.

He chuckled. “Considering that I can’t tell you who I talked to, what we did, or anything else, I’m afraid that’s the best you get, Tanner.”

“But you said a man,” I reminded him. “Means J.D. outed himself to you.”

Dr. Stephens flashed me a little smirk. “Yeah, and he outed you too. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him that we’ve already talked about this.”

I leaned my head back and groaned, doing my best not to watch as Doc wrapped his thing around my arm and stuck a needle in it. “Does this mean you know the other two as well?”

“He gave me their names too,” he assured me. “I’m not sure exactly what you’re doing, but if you want to send Cody to me sometime today, that will make all of this easier. Sadly, I don’t have a good reason to call her back.”

“So you’re not really worried about my shoulder?” I asked.

“Are you?” he countered. “Tanner, let’s be honest with each other. Even if I told you to sit out a round, there’s no way you would. So long as you think you can be out there without risking anyone else, I’m going to trust you. Now, as for your love life, I’d like to talk about condoms.”

“Used ‘em,” I promised.

“With J.D. too,” he told me.

Yep, I could feel my face heating up, but I did my damndest to push that back. “Haven’t gotten that far, but that’s the plan,” I promised. “Look, God’s honest truth, I hate the things. But I hate the idea of catching something more, and I’m not stupid about who sticks their dicks where.”

“Good man,” Dr. Stephens told me as he withdrew the needle and patched me up with a band-aid. “So, how about we tackle the hard stuff that you tough guys hate?”

“Ok?”

“Anal tears,” he said, writing some kind of numbers on the tubes of my blood. “Considering what we do out here, and that it’s every weekend, I want to make sure all of you use lubricant for any butt play.” Then he dropped the tubes into a rack and turned to face me. “I’m not talking about conditioner, spit, or that shit you boys think is good enough, you hear me?”

“Yeah, Doc,” I assured him.

“Water- or silicone-based with condoms,” he went on, not even caring that I was squirming in my chair. “If there’s any blood, from anyone, you come see me. Tell your friends the same. Just say you got bit by a spider, and I’ll make sure no one thinks anything of it. You have my word on that. I just want to make sure no one’s hurting, makes a mistake out there, and comes in here with broken bones because of it. I don’t care if you’re embarrassed, think it’s nothing, or any other excuse you have. Any concerns, Tanner, and you talk to me.”

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled.

So he slapped my shoulder. “And tell Anthony. He’s still raging about someone almost outing you and needing to cover.

Might want to let him know that J.D.'s going to need his oversight too."

"It's not quite like that," I mumbled.

"J.D. made it sound like it is," he countered.

I bent over to clutch my hands between my knees. "Ok, it's not like that *yet*," I clarified. "Doc, can I ask your advice?"

"Sure, but I don't know what help I'll be."

I nodded, willing to accept that. "Cody thought I was gay. She, um..." I licked my lips quickly, trying to figure out how to explain this. "Well, she got that in her head. So, last weekend, J.D. was walking down the hall with his shirt off. I looked at his tattoos. He was in a mood. One thing led to another, and we got kissing. Like, in one of those alcoves off the hall, right? Cody caught us."

"You need to be careful with that," Dr. Stephens warned me. "Some people won't just yell. They'll hit - and bring a few of their friends to help - and I don't want you out a few weekends because of homophobia."

"Yeah, I know," I promised. "But my thing is, she still thought I was gay. So, she decided to help me out and date me in public. I never even thought she'd guess gay, you know? I mean, I thought I'd been giving her enough hints that I was into her. And, well, we talked about it Sunday night. But here's the thing. Um, she kinda... Well... We had sex Wednesday."

"Ok," he said, clearly waiting for the rest.

"Am I screwing this up?" I asked. "I mean, she thought I was gay!"

He shook his head slightly. "When she slept with you?"

"No!" I grunted in frustration. "No, I cleared it up before then. I'm just wondering if I'm taking some, I dunno, advantage of her or something. Like, leading her on, but the other way around. Or, I dunno, fucking up consent, or something?"

Dr. Stephens began to chuckle as he returned to putting away the rest of his things. "No, Tanner. If you told her that

you like women, and she still fell into bed with you, and no one was being forced, then you're fine. Maybe she just doesn't care about you sleeping with men?"

I pushed out a heavy breath. "I'm hoping so. I'm just not that good with women, you know? I'm pretty sure she made the big scene on the stage because she thought she was being my beard. Now? I dunno, I'm just trying real hard to make sure I get this right, and I dunno who else to ask."

"Maybe Ty?" Dr. Stephens suggested, making it clear he really did know everything.

But I shook my head. "I think he's the last one of us to have any idea how to treat a woman. J.D.'s trying, but his version's a little rough around the edges."

"Which is half of his charm," Dr. Stephens agreed. "No, all you can do is talk about it with them, Tanner. And from the sounds of it, this relationship is going to take a whole lot of talking. But as for your results, I'll call you when they're in, so no need to come back and ask for them, ok?"

I pushed myself out of the chair, knowing a dismissal when I heard one. "Thanks, Doc."

"Wish more of you boys would realize that sexual health is part of what I do," he told me. "Stay safe out there tonight."

"Yes, sir."

Then I left his room and headed back to the main one, not surprised to see Anthony wasn't even close to done. As I passed, I paused to pat his back, stopping so we were side by side. He finished up what he was doing, then stood to face me.

"All good?" he asked.

"Yep," I assured him. "Also, I figured I should warn you that J.D.'s on the minority team too."

Both of Anthony's brows jumped up. "Yeah? You mean besides being half Mexican?"

"Yep. He's on the same team I am."

Anthony quickly glanced at the door, then back to me. “No shit?” he asked.

“No shit,” I admitted.

Anthony just nodded. “Ok. Well, next time I need him held down, I’ll ask for your help so no one can bitch about it later.”

“Thank you,” I said softly.

He nodded. “But I also don’t know shit until he tells me himself. Or until he tells me you said something to him.”

I patted his arm twice. “You’re a good man, Anthony.”

“Shit, now convince the rest of the riders that. The way you boys cuss at me when I’m just trying to put you back together?” He flashed me a wicked grin. “Pussies, all of ya.”

“Oh, and Cody knows too,” I added, since his word choice made me think of her and how well our date had ended. “And she’s my girlfriend, so you take good care of her.”

“Damn!” he laughed. “Look at you, Tanner. Starting to think I chose the wrong profession. I shoulda been out there dancing with the bulls so the ladies would even notice me.”

“Or just stop hiding in here,” I teased. “I mean, I noticed.”

He winked at me playfully. “Don’t go getting my hopes up.”

“Shit,” I laughed, turning for the door. “You aren’t that cute, Anthony.”

“Am so!” he called after me.

I just shook my head, laughed, and got out while the getting was good. Dr. Stephens and Anthony had known about me for a few years. I’d told Doc when filling out my basic health info. Anthony I’d warned before the first time he’d worked on me, just in case it made him feel weird. Both of them had made it clear that who I slept with didn’t have anything to do with them - just like the professionals they were.

But they’d also never breathed a word about it to anyone else. Oh, I knew all about the medical laws and confidentiality

rules, but that wouldn't have stopped everyone. Instead, Anthony had become a friend, deciding that since we were both the "minorities" around here, we should stick together.

But as I walked down the long hall, back towards the arena where I'd be working all night, I realized this meant more people knew than I'd realized. In one way, that felt good. My sexuality hadn't bothered either Doc or Anthony, and I'd just taken it for granted because they were medical professionals. But at the same time, I knew the more people who knew a secret, the more chances there were for someone to slip up.

And if this got out, there was no way the PBR was ready for that. It would be a hell of a lot easier to just get rid of us. All of us, if they had to.

CHAPTER 15



AFTER SPENDING the night curled up against Ty, he said I should ride over to the arena with J.D. I was pretty sure this was Ty's way of trying to apologize for blowing up at me in the shower last night, but I'd take it. I also really wanted to talk to J.D. about what I'd done wrong. In truth, I just wanted to talk to J.D. about *all* of this.

So the moment we were in the truck, I twisted in my seat to face him. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"First," J.D. said, turning the key so the glow plugs could warm up, "I wanna make sure you're ok."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I assured him, waving that off.

"Cody," he chided, giving me a look that made it clear I'd answered too easily. "Are you *ok*?"

Which was when I realized he thought Ty and I had gone at it last night. "We cuddled," I assured him. "I'm honestly fine, J.D. I just don't know what set Ty off, or if he's not really as ok with this poly thing as he says."

"Ah." He cranked his truck, then eased it out of the parking lot. "Well, I don't really know. See, Ty's always liked double-teaming girls. I mean, before Hannah, he and Renato had a reputation."

"And everyone knows about this?" I asked.

J.D. nodded his head slowly. "Pretty much, yeah. They didn't really hide it. And Renato's a real pretty man, so the girls thought they'd won the lottery. But yeah, I'm kinda

wondering if he assumed that was what this was supposed to be.”

“Oh.” I really didn’t know how I felt about that.

The honest truth was that I had no problem with the idea. Being pinned between two sexy men? Yes, please! At the same time, it sounded equally terrifying. Would I say something stupid? Would I even know what to do? Granted, I’d still like the chance to be that woman, but it didn’t completely remove the fear of screwing all of this up because I was in over my head.

“And Ty doesn’t know Tanner,” J.D. reminded me. “I mean, I don’t really know Tanner. I know of him, and I know enough about him, but it’s all in-passing shit, ya know?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

J.D. just nodded, almost like it was for himself. “And I know you like him a lot.”

“Ty?” I asked, since we’d just been talking about Tanner, but that wasn’t what it sounded like he was talking about.

“Yeah,” J.D. breathed. “But Cody, you know Ty’s had some fun, right? Like, with a *lot* of women.”

“I’m sure you have too,” I pointed out.

J.D. scoffed. “Not as much as you’d think. Naw, I mostly like to blow off some steam, do a little flirting, and then go home alone. Shit, babe. I’m too broken to get into much kinky shit. My point is that for Ty? Yeah, this is big. And, well, you being you, that means you aren’t gonna be diving for his dick like your life depends on it, and I’m not sure he knows any other way to ‘date’ someone, ya know?”

“Ok,” I mumbled, since all of that made sense.

But shit, it wasn’t like I really knew how to date anyone either. My experience consisted of two dinners at the Elbow with Cole, and the one night out with Tanner. Yep, I was pathetic. I had no idea what these guys even saw in me. At the same time, I wasn’t dumb enough to ask, because it was pretty damned clear they liked me enough to put up with me this

long. And if they were trying to pull some long game to run me off? Too bad. The PBR meant more to me than that.

I'd made it this far, and I wasn't going to let anything derail me now. Not even my pride or a whole lot of embarrassment. I had a little money in the bank, so I could keep going without these guys babysitting me every weekend. Yes, I really liked their company and all of their attention - but that was different than being helpless without it.

Yet all of this was weighing on me a bit. Ty had said something about not knowing where he fit. Since Tanner was my official boyfriend, and J.D. was my mentor, then why couldn't Ty just be my friend? The guys made it sound like that was impossible, but from my side of things, I couldn't understand why. If everyone around me was a man, then why would it be weird for me to spend time being friends with a man?

So I was making a plan. When we arrived at the arena, the place was wide open and sprawling. This wasn't a convention center like Tulsa or St. Louis had been. No, Cheyenne's arena was the outdoor type, with loads of parking and plenty of space for livestock. Dozens of stock trailers were parked in the back, clearly having hauled the bulls, and the scent of diesel exhaust was in the air. Past that, there was an area cordoned off for public entry, but that wasn't where J.D. headed.

He took me around the back. There, we both flashed our PBR cards to get in, and then headed deeper, looking for where to check in. That ended in a line with a few faces I recognized. Jake Cunningham, one of the other good riders, was at the front. A few Brazilians were behind him. I saw a patch from Australia, and a bag with a Canadian flag on the side. We fell in at the back.

Slowly but surely, the pair of us shuffled along. When we finally got to the front, I flashed my ID, checked in, and dropped a credit card on the counter. The woman on the other side looked up in surprise.

"I wanna pay for Ty McBride too," I told her.

J.D. chuckled. “Oh, my rookie gets a few bucks in her pocket and thinks she’s rich.”

I elbowed him to shut him up. The woman just nodded, swiped my card, and gave me back a paper to sign. Once that was all done, I was handed some paperwork that included my bull’s name, and then I moved aside for J.D. to take his turn. Scanning down the page, I found the name of my bull: Yeeter.

Well, that name could go either way. Pulling up the PBR’s website, however, made me feel a little better. He was listed at twenty-seventh, so not too good or too bad. When J.D. finished up, the pair of us headed even deeper into this place, aiming for something only J.D. knew.

“Yeeter?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Big, red, and kicks real high,” he told me. “Always comes out and goes to the left, so you’ll be good on ‘em.”

“Nice,” I breathed. “Who’d you get?”

“Monologue,” he said. “Fucker goes either way. Slip a little and he’ll switch to dump ya, but that’s ok. Means I can drive ‘em like I wanna.”

I nodded, soaking that up. “My potential sponsors wanna make sure I’m consistent. Any tips?”

J.D. finally stopped at an open locker room. “Plenty. The first is to not give a shit what the sponsors want. Don’t worry about nothin’ but stayin’ on that bull, Cody. Not the next one, not the last one, but *that* one. You ride real good, so get in there, get aggressive, and the whole world will be real impressed.”

I nodded, looking around at the place he’d picked. It smelled like a high school gym and was made out of concrete cinder blocks. “Locker rooms?”

“That’s all there is back here,” he admitted. “Now, let’s get pretty so we can get in line.”

Dropping my bag on the ground, I began pulling out my things. I had on my jeans and belt. My PBR buckle was

proudly visible. My shirt was the black one that said “Girls Do It” on one arm, and “Better” on the other. That meant all I needed was my vest and chaps.

J.D., on the other hand, pulled off his shirt and put on the one I was used to seeing him in. It was black with red trim and patches all down the sleeves. Lasso, Tillman, Ariat, and more. J.D. was the best rider in the PBR, though, so it made sense that everyone wanted their name on him.

I also tried hard not to look at his tattoos when he flashed so much bare skin. Didn't matter. J.D. still caught me, which earned me one of those devious little smiles of his. But when I started buckling on my chaps, he stopped worrying about his shirt and bent to give me a hand.

“Kinky!” someone said from the hall.

We both looked back to see Kaleb Brown, one of J.D.'s longtime admirers. “Set up and get ready,” J.D. told him. “If you don't want a woman seein' your little dick, then pick somewhere else.”

“Fuck, I'm hung,” Kaleb joked.

I scoffed at that, but focused on getting ready. Spurs, chaps, vest. I checked all my Fierce Denim logos, just to make sure I had enough. Then I ran my fingers through my loose hair to style it a little, resettled my hat, and turned to J.D.

“Well?” I asked.

“You look like the real deal now,” he assured me.

“Should show off your tits more,” Kaleb taunted from the other side of the room.

I rolled my eyes, but ignored him. While J.D. finished getting himself ready, I pulled out my bull rope and helmet. I had a hair tie on my wrist so I could braid this mess after the opening ceremony. Besides that, I couldn't think of what else I'd need except some clue as to how to get around this place.

Soon enough, the pair of us were headed down to the main area to get in line. Outside, we could hear the first sounds of the stadium filling up. The sound of so many people was a dull

hum that just made the excitement start to grow a little in my chest. In the distance, the lowing of cattle fit right in. There was a smell in the air that I couldn't quite make out until we turned a corner.

“Open air,” I realized.

“Yup,” J.D. said. “This is Cheyenne. There's gonna be pyrotechnics on the back side, a whole lot of music playin', but no bullpen to jump on. The whole setup's different, but don't matter none. Bulls still buck the same.”

I nodded to show I heard, and then we were at the staging area. Even better, I saw a bright purple jersey in the middle of everything.

“Tanner!” I called.

He spun, a smile taking up his face, then made his way over. Without a single word, that man wrapped one arm around me, yanked off his own straw hat, and then kissed me hard. I grabbed a handful of his jersey, pulling him closer, and behind us someone whooped in encouragement.

But my lips had parted, and Tanner was clearly not the shy type. He took the chance and kissed me the way he had that first night. His body was close enough to mine that I could feel every single layer of the protective padding that was under his uniform. That was the only reason I didn't try to grab his ass.

Then he pulled back. “So, um... I had fun too.”

Uh, what? Right, my text! Fuck, that was what he was talking about. A stupid smile took over my face, and I was pretty sure every cowboy around us could see it.

“Are your thumbs broken?” I asked.

He shrugged, a lopsided and boyish smile on his lips. “I wrote about ten replies out, but deleted them all. Sounded dumb.”

“Not how you get another date,” J.D. told him. “Now kiss your girl again, because we need to line up.”

So Tanner leaned in and kissed me one more time. “Who'd ya draw?”

“Yeeter,” I said.

He nodded. “Good. I’ll still be keeping a close eye on ya. Eighteenth, right?”

“Mhm.”

Then he tipped his head towards the very disorganized line. “Go play, cowgirl.”

“Be safe,” I told him, managing to take a single step away.

Tanner reached out to swat my ass. “Safe is your job, not mine.” Then he grinned and jogged the other way.

“Show off!”

Now that was a voice I recognized. Looking around, I finally found Ty leaning against the wall, his Wrangler patches making him stand out, and that straw Stetson was right where it belonged - on his head. Forgetting all about J.D., I headed straight for Ty.

“Hey,” I breathed when I reached him.

His hand caught my waist, but almost like he was holding me at a distance. I understood, but that didn’t mean I liked it. Still, he was looking at me strangely.

“Was told my entry’s all paid up this weekend,” he said.

I shrugged. “It was my way of saying I’m sorry.” I scrunched up my face. “Maybe we can do friends?”

His face relaxed, almost like so much hidden tension had just vanished. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I can do friends, Cody. I think that’s a lot better than my idea.”

“Because J.D. may have claimed he’s my mentor, Ty, but you’re the one I spent so many years studying.”

He began to nod slowly. “Ok, I can handle a little competition.” Pushing off the wall, he draped an arm over my shoulder, then headed for the line, leaning in towards my ear. “Thanks, babe. You make this a lot easier, even if I’m the one who should be paying your entry.”

“Next time,” I told him. “But I’m officially not broke and tired of being a bum.”

“If you win this, you’ll be even less broke,” he pointed out just as the music began to play in the arena. “And it’s show time.”

CHAPTER 16



J.D. HADN'T BEEN KIDDING when he'd said there'd be pyrotechnics. There were also lights, music, and so much more. With a total of thirty-five bull riders, and starting from the bottom, that meant I was the seventeenth out. Just on the wrong side of halfway up the rankings. Then again, I was in the top twenty, so I currently qualified for the World Finals at the end of the year, if I could just hold on to it.

Not too bad for a girl who'd earned most of her points on the Touring Pro circuit, placing second. Even better, when they called out my name, I lifted my hat to a roar of applause and cheering from the crowd. Much of it sounded female, but I'd take it.

Ty had slipped down to ninth overall after two buck-offs last weekend, but J.D. was still the number one in the world. Surprisingly, the top three guys were introduced standing on the tops of the bull chutes. As their successes and records were called out, a spotlight landed on them. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore J.D. was the only person to get a louder round of cheers than I had.

Once we were all out in the arena, a prayer was said, the national anthem was sung, and the bullfighters were introduced. The last thing was Cletus, the clown who kept people entertained when things slowed down behind the chutes, although his arrival was our dismissal. As a herd, we all headed back to the staging area to grab helmets and ropes, and start getting ready.

The first riders needed to be getting on the backs of their bulls. With four at a time, and two sides, that was eight men “saddling” up. Chaos ensued as those men tried to get their things, get ready, and get where they belonged, but it was the kind I loved.

There was a smell in the air, made of cow shit, diesel exhaust, and excitement. The hum of so many men talking about their bulls, their scores, and their injuries was at a pitch that made all of this feel familiar, just like the open rodeos back home. And when I found my rope and set up to get it ready, I wasn't alone.

J.D. fell in on my left. A moment later, Ty moved to the spot on my right. I was busy working rosin into my rope, but these two? Their focus was entirely on me.

“You need to braid your hair,” J.D. reminded me.

I lifted my gloveless hand, showing the rubber band around my right wrist. “I thought you liked playing with it.”

“Babe, I am so good with that,” he promised, snagging the tie.

Ty stole my hat, hanging it on the panel before me. “You got a spare rope this time?”

“Just the one from St. Louis,” I admitted.

So he bent and pulled out a black rope with a bright silver bell on the end. “Kinda what I figured. So put some rosin on this one while you're at it. It's your backup.” He hung that beside the one I was working on.

I glanced over to catch his gaze. “Thank you. I mean that.”

That beautiful chocolate color of his eyes was nice. Like five shades lighter than J.D.'s, but I liked it just as much. The smile that touched Ty's lips was even better. Soft. Kind. Honest. Something in my belly flipped over itself.

“I'm just taking care of my number one fan,” he mumbled.

“Less looking,” J.D. grumbled, turning my head back to the front. “What part of half-Mexican makes you think I'm good at anything French? Especially a braid!”

“You like it,” Ty teased before turning back to me. “Who’d you get?”

“Yeeter,” I said. “You?”

“Just Duck.” He shrugged. “Sounds like there should be a lot of full rides this weekend, though. And Yeeter’s a good one. You can get some points on him. Just spur and he’ll kick his heels up high.”

“Ok,” I breathed, trying to hype myself up.

“And done,” J.D. announced. “Now, Cody, if you wanna get some oomph out of Yeeter, get right up on your hand.”

“Use your core,” Ty said.

The pair looked at each other, but J.D. kept going. “Get your outside leg off him, and let the judges see a little air.”

“Not if she’s gonna tip forward,” Ty countered.

J.D. reached over for his glove and yanked it on aggressively. “Ty, you need to do the same. Stop sittin’ back on your pockets, thinkin’ your pretty face is gonna earn you scores.”

“Fuck off,” Ty snapped. “Not all of us wanna be hobbling around like you before the night’s over.”

“Enough!” I yelled, cutting them off and making a few others look over. “I’m trying to get ready, not get riled up. So if you two wanna wave your dicks around...” I pointed to the side.

J.D. chuckled, but Ty grumbled under his breath as he started to warm up his own rope. Behind us, I heard someone joke about seeing who had the balls around here. My guys heard it too. For a little too long, we all just added rosin, worked it into the fibers with a few hard yanks down the rope, and then moved to the next spot.

“Sorry,” J.D. finally said, but the words were soft.

Ty nodded. “Yep,” he agreed. “Thing is, she rides like both of us. And you’re right, I do need to push a little.”

“You could be givin’ me a run,” J.D. told him. “Man, I’ve been waitin’ for five years to have someone knock me down a bit. The two of ya? You’re the only ones with a real chance to do it. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Thanks,” Ty told him just as a chorus of cheers leaked in from the arena.

“Sounds like the first ride went for a full eight,” I said, hoping to ease a little more of this tension.

At the same time, the announcer boomed, “And what a way to open this show! That’s Jackson Cloutier with a score of 78.25! Let’s hear it for this young man from Saskatchewan, Canada!”

“Hey?” I asked, the question for either of them. “Are the sponsors here or watching the stream?”

“Both,” Ty informed me. “The ones who came to talk to you are probably here watching, but there will be more looking for places to add their products.”

“Don’t worry about it,” J.D. told me. “Focus on the bull, Cody. Just *this* ride. Just *this* bull. Sponsors are for next week.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“No,” J.D. said, cutting me off. “I’m serious. Ya start tryin’ to show off, and you’re gonna get stomped on. Trust what you know. Ride this bull. *Just this one.*”

“He’s right,” Ty said. “If you start putting on a show, they’ll start expecting it every time. Just ride, Cody. Keep your chin tucked, your arm high, and let those pretty little rhinestones flash.”

I finished up my rope, then bent for my bag. They were right. I knew they were, but that didn’t help this feeling of nervous excitement brewing inside me. My first weekend, I’d been nothing. Last weekend, I’d been a spectacle. This weekend, I needed to show I was the real deal, and that meant gettin’er done, as they say.

But there was one more thing I needed to do. Hopefully, it would get my mind right back where it belonged. Pulling out my phone, I whipped off a text to the most important man in my life: my father.

Cody:

I'll be the seventeenth out, so you have a bit of a wait. Bull's Yeeter, kicks high but the guys don't think he's a problem.

Dad:

Make me proud, Cody! Gerardo said he's pissed that he had to hire some high school boy to help with his next cutting of hay.

Cody:

Tell Gerardo it's good for him. And I'll text you when I'm done, but it won't be until late.

Dad:

Then tell your friends to let me know if you get hurt.

Cody:

Not getting hurt, Dad. I'm getting sponsors! Talk later!

Locking my phone, I dropped that into my bag and pulled my rope off the panel. With that hanging on my shoulder, I looked between the guys. "Ok. I think I'm ready, so I'm gonna go up there and see what the layout is like."

"Right behind ya," Ty promised.

"And a bit," J.D. said as he added just a little more rosin. "Helmet, girl!"

I lifted my hand, showing I already had that with me. "I'm on it. Play nice, boys."

That earned me a smile from both of them, but the truth was that I needed a moment on my own. I had to get out of my

own way, get my mind in the zone, and brace for this. My third event, and I wasn't doing too bad. Somewhere out there, my daddy was watching with his friends, and I wanted to make him proud, even if he said I already had.

I just wanted this.

Following the hall, I found myself outside in an aisle between cattle chutes. On either side of me, bulls mooed. Some thrashed their heads, hoping for a little more space. Others looked like they were taking a nap. Stock contractors wandered between them, along with other PBR staff members. I even saw a man whose shirt labeled him as the veterinarian.

But there was something about the clouds in the sky, the bright lights that looked like they belonged in a football stadium, and just the sound of it all. So many people, and they were here to watch. That was what made me want this so bad. It was the draw that kept us getting up and getting back on. Sure, the money didn't hurt at all, but this? It was what lit the fire in our blood.

"Hey," a guy said, falling in at my side.

I looked over and didn't recognize him. "Hey," I replied.

He thrust out his hand. "Gustavo Ribeiro. Brazil." And while his accent was thick, his English was good.

"Cody Jennings, USA," I said.

He grinned. "Yeah. Renato and Emilio told me." Then he gestured up towards the backside of the scoreboard. "Where ya at?"

"Eighteenth. You?"

He grinned. "Fifteen. They say you're gonna make me work for Rookie of the Year."

I laughed once. "Um, didn't I start a bit late for that? I mean, J.D. keeps telling me I'm gonna be, but I thought he was just stroking my ego."

"Nope," he promised. "It's all points. Highest points for the first year. There's three more, but they're nothing." He gestured to the arena. "Two went already. Ate dirt."

“Which was where I was headed,” I admitted. “Wanted to get a look at this place.”

“Then I’ll come,” he offered.

I looked over, my eyes narrowing. “It’s ok. I think I know my way around the chutes.”

He just hooked his thumbs on the waistband of his chaps. “The guys from Brazil say you’re good, Cody.” He dragged his tongue across the inside of his cheek, making it puff out. “But Austin’s up there, and, well...” He tried his best to smile. “I’m a gentleman.”

I turned to face the guy. “Is he talking shit about me again?”

“Still,” he said. “Austin Chambers, Eli Tripwood, Derek Mitchell, and Casey Davis. You need to keep your eyes on them, because my English is good, but I do not think that rape is slang.”

“Shit,” I breathed. “No, I’d love some company, Gustavo. Thank you.”

He grinned again, nodded once, then gestured for me to go first. “And Brazil will take care of ya. It’s why women love us.”

Well, right about now, it was why I did. And yet, I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe this guy was looking to set me up for a fall. If we were both competing against each other for Rookie of the Year, would he really be this nice? Then again, not all guys were like the ones I’d ridden against back home. No, it seemed that in the PBR, most men were the real kind.

Most. Sadly, that wasn’t the same as all.

CHAPTER 17



THE MOMENT CODY was out of the area, I turned to J.D. “Don’t you dare get her fucked up in her riding,” I warned him.

The look he shot me would’ve scared off lesser men. Granted, it made my balls suck up a bit, but damned if I would show it.

“You get her to sit pretty,” he told me, “and I’ll get her to get in there.”

“No,” I begged. “Listen to me, J.D. She can’t ride like you. Cody’s half your size.” I paused to look him over. “Ok, maybe not that drastic. All I’m saying is that when you get slung into the wall, you get up. Her?”

He pulled off his glove and tossed it down on his bag. “Yeah, and I don’t want her getting high every night so she’ll be able to sleep.”

“That,” I agreed. “So can we at least agree to make her ride correct first?”

“Her core’s good,” he pointed out. “Shit, *we* aren’t that stable on a bull.”

“I know,” I muttered. “I talked to her about it on the ride up. She’s short in the waist, so more power and less wobble.”

He nodded. “Makes sense.” Then he turned to lean his back against the panels, his eyes scanning the lack of people around us. “Why’d ya go full dick last night?”

“We’re talking about Cody,” I reminded him.

“Kinda am,” he agreed, that crazy smile of his taking over. “And we’re talkin’ about her rides. If ya don’t think that you fuckin’ with her head’s gonna jack that shit up, you’re dumber than I thought.”

“And how dumb did ya think I was?” I shot back.

He laughed. “Dumb enough to listen to me.” Then he shrugged. “But seriously, what was that shit?”

I decided to focus on putting Cody’s backup rope away for her. Just to make sure no one fucked with it. “This shit’s a mess, you know?”

“Yup.”

Since that seemed to be all I was getting, I kept going. “So, when she pushed me off, I took it wrong.”

“And you’re full of shit,” he pointed out.

Which meant I couldn’t bullshit my way out of this. “You want the blunt truth, J.D.?”

“It’s why I asked,” he drawled.

“This? What the fuck is in it for me? I had that girl all to myself, and you convinced me that wasn’t enough. Now, I barely get to see her. So yeah, I’m kinda wondering where the fuck I fit in. She’s going out with Tanner, hanging out with you, and me? I’m sleeping alone, listening to someone fuck her the way I didn’t because I was trying to be a nice guy. That real enough for ya?”

“You woulda lost her by now,” J.D. assured me.

“Like hell,” I snapped.

Those dark eyes of his hung on me, looking much too serious. “You woulda. I woulda made sure of it. She’s not a toy, Ty. I do not put this much fuckin’ effort into anything just to watch someone else shit all over it.” He pushed away from the fence and stepped towards me, all of his crazy back in full force. “So you listen real good, cowboy. That girl? She’s *my rookie*. She might make your dick real hard, but she’s got her claws deep in my chest. Who you think’s gonna fight harder for her?”

“Back the fuck off,” I warned him.

He didn't, but he stopped pressing in. “So here's the deal, Ty,” he warned. “You break her heart and I'll break your face. You chase her off, and I'll break your knees. Get me?”

“Yep,” I promised.

And if I was honest, I was scared. J.D. might turn into a cute little puppy when Cody was around, but I knew better. I'd seen what this guy was willing to do when she wasn't around. That he'd waited for her to walk away before this nice little talk? Kinda proved my point.

“I want her to win,” I assured him. “I don't even give a shit if she's placing higher than me. That girl rides like she belongs here, so don't you dare think I'm trying to run her off. All I'm saying is that dating? Yeah, I didn't expect it to be a solo event. Starting to feel like I'm sitting on the sidelines more than anything else.”

“I can see that,” he agreed. “Doesn't mean we can do much this weekend.”

“I know,” I grumbled.

Then the crazy motherfucker reached up to pat my arm almost in encouragement. “But hang in there. She thinks you're hot.”

“And?” I pressed.

He shrugged that off. “And you already fucked her once. Maybe try getting to know her, Ty. There's a lot more to women than how many holes they have to fit your dick into.”

“I've been trying,” I reminded him.

“Try *harder*,” he said. “And the next time your dick starts hurting because she's riding someone else's? Yeah, you think about how those girls felt when you kicked 'em outta your room. You stop for just a second and consider that you, Ty McBride, might not be the gift to women you think you are. Maybe, just maybe, you're more like a curse.”

“Low blow,” I warned.

“Didn’t say I was no better,” he promised. “Kinda why I’m still sittin’ on the sidelines, get me?”

The craziest part of that was that I did. I honestly could see where he was coming from. I also didn’t want to continue this conversation, so I snagged my rope, my helmet, and my glove, then turned and left. Nope, I didn’t bother saying a thing. Clearly, this little discussion had already reached its end.

And none of it was what I’d signed up for. There were a million beautiful women in this country. Hundreds of them at each event. Cody wasn’t special because she was pretty. Fuck, if I was honest, the girl from the bar Wednesday night had been better-looking.

Nope, Cody was special because she had steel in her core. She was special because as soft and sweet and gentle as she was, that girl could also hold her own. That was what had me even considering this insanity that J.D. seemed to be organizing. This girl was fucking special enough to make me start thinking about next week and the one after, and I wasn’t used to how that felt.

The real question was if she felt the same. Sure, she seemed to like my company well enough - at least for now. Granted, so did most women. I’d worked hard for my reputation, and I knew the right things to say. Although, when I said them to Cody, they weren’t lines of bullshit.

She was also a taken girl.

Maybe it had started out as a ruse. Sadly, it hadn’t stayed that way very long. Cody had agreed to date Tanner to keep Austin from outing him, and now she was fucking the guy. I was pretty sure she liked him, judging by the way she got those cute doe eyes around him. The ones she should be turning on me.

And the truth was that sometimes a guy just lost out. Someone was faster, a girl wasn’t into him, or the timing just didn’t work. Sometimes, a girl just changed her mind or found something better. I knew that too well. Hell, I’d used that line myself a few times to kick women out of my hotel room. “If only we’d met in a different place,” I’d tell her, or maybe, “I’ll

be back this way next year.” My problem was that with Cody, I was starting to wonder if those things might be true - but for me.

Poly, she'd said. Yeah, but polyamory meant we all got to sleep around, and I was damned sure Cody wouldn't be ok with me finding another date. This? It was more like her getting to have her cake and eat it too. At first, I'd hoped that maybe getting her a little experience in bed would have her bringing it all back to me. Even us up a bit, or something. Since I'd fucked a few dozen - or hundreds - of women, if her “body count” got high enough, it wouldn't be something she could throw in my face.

That was shit of me. I knew it. I honestly did, but that didn't mean I felt any different. When I imagined being with Cody, I thought about taking her back home to meet my parents and siblings. I could imagine her riding in Calgary and showing my little brother up. In my mind, I saw us riding horses out on the back pasture, checking fences or some other made-up excuse so we could make out in the tall grass.

This? How would I be able to tell my mother that my girlfriend had a couple extra boyfriends? How many of these guys would laugh at me and ask when I'd passed my balls over to her? And while it might be kinda fun to tag-team her with J.D., I wasn't sure Tanner was into that sort of thing. He seemed too nice for it.

I blew out a breath hard enough to puff my cheeks and kept walking towards the chutes. I sure as shit wasn't a prude. I definitely wasn't about to judge her for how many men she fucked - or the fact that she wanted to fuck them. Nope. I'd be the first one standing up to defend her right to do it. Equality and all that. I just kinda wanted her to be mine just a little bit at the same time.

I made it to the top of the chutes to see her hanging out with the Brazilian riders. Emilio and Gustavo were both pointing out at the arena, gesturing like they were warning her about something. My feet paused, and for a second, I just let myself look her over.

Her boots were trimmed in green. Her jeans were black. Her chaps were mostly black, with big pink swirls down the sides and bottoms, plenty of neon pink fringe, and green rhinestone conchos up the sides. Her black shirt with the pink and green letters on her arms, and that massive pink Fierce Denim logo on her vest? Yeah, she was impossible to miss.

The colors were dramatic. Her posture was strong, just like all the men around her. Combined with that blonde braid and her black Resistol? The woman took my damned breath away. She made my heart beat just a little harder, like it had decided to finally wake the fuck up. Somehow, Cody Jennings managed to both look like she belonged here perfectly, and as if she was some angel who'd paused for a moment to wish us well.

When a hand slapped up against my back, I realized I was smiling at her stupidly. "So, you ain't given up on that bitch yet?"

The voice belonged to Austin Chambers. This same idiot had already managed to grab her tits and get thirteen stitches when J.D. had cut him open with a broken bottle for it. Clearly, he hadn't learned a damned thing.

"Why do you care?" I asked, looking over at him.

He grinned, but his crazy lacked something after talking to J.D. "Because if she keeps riding, you know they're gonna start changing up the rules to make it easy for her. Next thing you know, she'll be riding two-handed, or we'll all have to suffer through weak-ass bulls so no one gets a boo-boo."

"And she's outriding your ass," I pointed out. "Pretty sure she doesn't need easy mode."

"She outrode you too," he reminded me.

I just shrugged. "Difference is that I'm not worried about it. J.D. outrides me too. Don't hear you whining about him none."

"Fuck," he grumbled. "J.D.'s a guy. Her? Yeah, this sport is for the toughest *men* on dirt, Ty. These girls think they can just come in and fuck up everything? First Boy Scouts, then

they had to get their own baseball, basketball, and a version of every other sport. Now this? Nah, I'm not interested in kissing my career goodbye because that chick can't keep up."

"She *is* keeping up," I said. "You aren't."

"Yeah, so you still stupid over her or something?" he asked.

"Still willing to chase her," I told him. "She says we're friends. I say that eventually Tanner's gonna screw up and get dumped."

He laughed. "Yeah, kinda what I thought," he said. "Just make sure she gets a clue before Iowa. Maybe she's a publicity stunt. Maybe she thinks she can hack it." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "She can't, and I know how to make sure she never comes back. So you'd better hurry up and get your dick in her."

"Try something with her," I warned, "and I'll be the one with the bottle." I looked over to meet his eyes, making it clear I wasn't kidding around. "I don't care whose dick she's on. You fuck with that girl and I'll make sure you regret it. This is the only warning you'll get."

"Good talk," he laughed out. "Real good one, Ty. Just one problem. Don't believe ya at all."

As he walked his ass over to find his chute, I slammed my fist against the post behind me. Fucking asshole! Of course he couldn't just accept that she was doing this. Nope, even the thought of a woman being able to cut it on the Tough Enough series seemed to be enough to make his dick hurt.

And Cody would be the one who ended up paying for it.

CHAPTER 18



AFTER EVERY GROUP of four riders, there was a pause to move in new bulls - and for the televised event to sneak in a few commercials. Cletus, the PBR's clown, did his best to make a few bad jokes, dance around the dirt out there, and keep everyone entertained. Then the next set of four went.

Over and over, riders were sticking for all eight seconds. I watched as the scores began filling up the scoreboard. Most were in the mid-eighties, which meant that was where I wanted to be. The Brazilians warned me about the corners and how the bulls would race the edges at times. Made sense, and if I needed to get out of their way, the safest direction was to run to the chutes.

Then, the next thing I knew, another set of bulls was getting loaded, and it was my turn to get ready. As the seventeenth rider to go, sitting at number eighteen in the world rankings, I would have a nice chute, right in the center of the arena. I also wouldn't get much time to get ready.

Still, I headed over to find the attendants doing their best to settle my bull down. "Cody Jennings!" one of the guys bellowed right into my face.

"That's me," I said, holding out my rope.

The man looked me over, scoffed, and then called out again, "Cody Jennings!"

"Dumb fuck," J.D. said, appearing as if by magic, "when the lady says it's her, just take her fucking rope."

“I’m looking for Cody,” the guy insisted, “not whoever this is.”

“Cody Jennings,” I told him as I traded out my hat for my neon pink helmet. “Not my first rodeo, cowboy.”

“Just put on the fucking rope,” J.D. ordered as he crawled across the chute. “Or didn’t ya hear I finally got me a rookie to train up?”

“Your funeral,” the attendant finally grumbled, but at least he started working my rope under the bull.

Standing there placidly, Yeeter was everything J.D. had promised: big and red. I stepped over the chute, careful to balance myself just over the bull’s back, and waited for J.D. to get his hands on the tail of the rope. Out in the arena, Cletus was telling some joke and I could hear people laughing, but right now, my mind was on nothing but riding this bull - exactly like J.D. had told me.

“Hold it,” I told him.

He did, and I reached over to drag my glove over the rope, warming up all that rosin I’d put on it. Again, then again. Beneath me, Yeeter barely even budged, except when he slung his head back to get rid of a fly. I then moved my attention over to my handle and started working on that. So long as Cletus was doing his thing, I wouldn’t be allowed to go out, so no need to rush.

“This bull is all you want, Cody,” J.D. told me. “Get right up on your hand, take a few chances to spur if you get ‘em, and just show these boys how to ride like a girl.”

I glanced up at him with a smile. “Gonna watch me?”

“Fuck yeah,” he huffed. “Gonna be right here yellin’ at ya the whole time.”

“Then watch these feet,” I told him just as the chute attendant leaned in.

“And we’re a go,” he told me.

I eased down on the bull’s back, had J.D. pull my rope as tight as he could, and then started wrapping the tail around my

hand. I liked to keep my wrap nice and simple, so it would hopefully make it easy to get me out. Everything was good and sticky. This bull was standing as still as a statue - which wasn't normal - and I was mentally in the zone.

Then, from the arena, "C'mon, Cody!"

That was Tanner. I heard him, but I didn't bother looking over. No, right here, right now, this was my time. As I patted down the fingers on my left hand, making sure everything was right where I wanted, J.D. climbed back over to the safe side of the chutes. One scoot closer, putting my hand right into my crotch, and then I nodded.

The gate clanked and my bull woke right the fuck up. Before the gate was even swinging, Yeeter was moving. Up. This bad boy was ginormous, and feeling him propel himself out of the chutes was the kind of adrenaline rush I could never get enough of. My entire body heaved. My core clenched, holding me in place. My legs were locked right into his armpits, and I rode.

One pace out of the chute, Yeeter began to spin to the left. His bucks were amazing, wanting to whip me forward with the power of them, so I just lifted up a little bit. Letting my thighs hold the impact, I used my free hand to recenter each time his ass came down, and my legs were working.

When Yeeter's ass came up, I pushed my legs straight, thrusting my weight right down through my heels. When his front jumped up and over, I lifted, leaning forward just a bit to keep my balance, and ran my spurs over his thick hide. Points. Those were all points, and I had this shit down.

Then Yeeter decided to throw me for a curve. Bouncing up with all four legs, he twisted in the middle and changed direction, heading out of my hand. This should've been my weak side, but I was too used to right-handed bulls. Riding as a leftie had made me figure things out quick, so I had this. I had all of this.

And with the bull turning to the right, that meant my left leg was on the outside. There was no better time than now to see if I could do this, so I started lifting my whole leg off his

side, making the attempts at spurring that much more dramatic. The bucks got bigger. The kicks got higher. When I felt Yeeter's back brush mine, even though I was sitting nice and centered, I knew I'd figured it out, and all thanks to a date with a mechanical bull.

That was when the bullfighters moved in. A flash of fireworks at the corner of my eye made it clear I'd missed the buzzer, but I'd evidently made eight. As Yeeter kept bucking like the second hand on a Rolex, I looked up to see Tanner waving me down. I was good. I'd done it. Now I just had to get out of here without getting crushed.

A yank at the tail of my rope, and I was free. Even better, this bull just kept going, not giving a shit about me, which let me slide off to the side. My feet hit the ground and I was moving. Purple shoved around me, and the guys took over, doing their thing, but I didn't stop. Not until I was back at the chutes, pulling off my helmet.

That was when I finally got the chance to look back and appreciate just what our bullfighters did. Tanner tapped the bull's nose, getting Yeeter's attention. When the beast turned to chase him, Isaac came around the other side, straightening him back out. Then it was Jorge's turn. They spun around the animal, pivoting like some kind of football player trying to avoid a tackle, and the bull didn't stand a chance.

His bucks gave out and then Yeeter almost paused, looking around. Finding the open gate to get him out, he decided to take it, trotting his fat red ass out as if he was almost offended to have been here in the first place.

"And that's yet another qualified ride for one of our newest rookies on the Tough Enough series!" the announcer called out. "Looks like Cody Jennings impressed the judges a little too, because she's walking out of here with a score of 88.0!"

"Whoo!" Tanner yelled as he caught me from behind, lifted me up, and spun me around.

I laughed, landing on my feet just to turn around and hug him. "I'll take it," I said.

So he held out my bull rope, which had fallen off somewhere out in the dirt. “Yeah you will,” he agreed as he passed it over. Then he palmed the side of my face with one hand, pulled off his hat with the other, and stole a quick kiss. “Get out of the arena, cowgirl.”

I swatted him on the ass and then jogged for the gate at the side. Sadly, our little moment hadn’t gone unnoticed. Granted, I had a feeling that was the whole reason Tanner had done it.

“And this is something you don’t see every day in the PBR,” the announcer told the crowd. “Seems that Tanner Burns, one of our bullfighters, has a thing for a bull rider.”

Someone in the stands jeered, but most of them were laughing.

“Now, don’t go thinking like that,” the announcer insisted. “Wearing pink, the PBR is proud to boast the first female rider on the Tough Enough series! This is just her third weekend with us, and she has already racked up six qualified rides - and has the points to prove it!”

I slipped through the gap the moment the gate opened, only to find Jake Cunningham waiting on the other side. J.D. and Ty were nowhere to be seen, but Jake was holding my hat out like a peace offering.

“Nice ride, rookie,” he told me.

I passed him my helmet, wiped at my hair with one hand, and used the other to get my hat on right. When that was done, I took my helmet back and looked around.

“Where’s J.D.?” I asked.

“With Ty,” Jake told me. “J.D. said Emilio was watching your shit. Figured that since I’m not up for a bit, I could bring your hat down.”

Behind us, the announcer was still going on about girls and pink. It sounded like Cletus was also trying to pick on Tanner for dating a woman tougher than him. I rolled my eyes and did my best to tune it all out, but Jake saw.

“That shit makes you crazy too?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” I agreed. “No comment about my position, spurring, that direction change, or anything I did. All they say is that I’m a toy, cute in pink, and all-American.”

Jake patted my shoulder, then steered me towards the stairs. “Well, it was a good ride. I have no idea how the hell you sit up there so stable, but your ass never leaves the hair.”

“No balls,” I teased.

He roared out a laugh. “Yep, that’d do it.”

But when one of the gates clanked, we both paused to watch the next rider. The bull was little, black, and wiry. He also bucked like he knew exactly what he was doing. I watched as the rider’s ass got higher, and then higher still. His upper body was all over the place. Naturally, when that little bull went in for his spins, the rider didn’t stand a chance. With a hard grunt, the cowboy hit the dirt, showing a clock stopped at 4.47 seconds.

“Hollowed out his back,” I muttered, turning to keep going.

But Jake caught my arm. “Who taught you to ride, Cody?”

“My father,” I told him, but he just lifted a brow. “Old rodeo bull rider for half his life.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “So he rode the rankest ones, huh?”

“Sounds like it,” I admitted. “Daddy always said that technique could outperform any bovine.”

Jake just pulled off his hat and shoved a hand through his hair. “You know, a month ago I woulda said that no girl could do this. When you showed up in Tulsa, I figured we’d get to see the ambulance haul your ass off. Now?” He slapped my back. “I’m starting to think I’m going to have to up my game.”

“Was that a compliment?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah, it was,” he agreed. Then he leaned closer. “I’d say I’d buy you a beer tonight, but I don’t want that to sound like a pickup line, because this drama following you around?” He shook his head. “I do not wanna have Cletus trying to explain that I’m not gay.”

“Nothing wrong with being gay,” I shot back.

Jake just smiled at me. “Is in the PBR. It’s right up there with being a girl, and people get their ass beat for that. Why the fuck do you think I’m here?”

“Playing bodyguard,” I realized.

He nodded. “Watch yourself, Cody. Someone might push you into a chute. He might catch you in the halls alone. I’m not even sure who it’d be, but the guys talk, and all of it sounds...” He made a face. “Let’s just say that my momma taught me better than that.”

“Well, tell your momma she raised a good man,” I told him. “And Jake? Thanks. I mean it. All I want is to ride the bulls, and I wish y’all would just convince yourself I’m a guy or something.”

“Or something,” he agreed, offering me a smile.

But I’d take it. Hell, I’d take all of this, even the dumbasses who’d convinced half the cowboys to act like my personal protection tonight. Mostly because it just proved that there were more of the good guys here than the bad ones.

CHAPTER 19



I KNEW Ty was sitting at ninth place. I also knew Emilio had taken it upon himself to make sure someone was keeping an eye on Cody the same way I had. From that idiot Brazilian rookie to Jake Cunningham, the guys were all watching over her, which meant I had to look after Ty. Renato wasn't here this weekend, and I'd be damned if I let my new friend have some chute attendant tighten his rope.

But the bulls were moving fast tonight. The scoreboard was full, and most of those names had points beside them. This weekend was going to shuffle around the world rankings a bit, and I was real curious to see who'd go up and who'd go down. Mostly because I needed Cody to move up a little more.

So when the next group of bulls began to fill the chutes, I left my shit sitting at the side and went to find Ty. It was as easy as I'd expected. He was off to the side, leaning over the rail and looking at the crowd in the stands. A couple of kids were walking away with paper in their hands, so I could only guess he'd been cornered for an autograph or something.

"Ty!" I called out.

He looked up. "Yeah?"

So I waved back at the chutes. "Eleven's up."

"Shit," he mouthed, jogging my way. When he got close enough, he patted my shoulder, then headed for where he'd stored his things at the back of the raised platform. I took his hat. He grabbed his rope, glove, and helmet. Together, we

aimed for the new string of bulls, counting to make sure he was at the right one.

“Ty McBride,” he told the attendant.

The man looked up. “Yep. Just cool your jets for a bit. We got a wild one down there.”

Sure enough, someone was getting knocked around in the chute. Almost like we were sharing a brain, Ty and I both leaned over the panels at the same time. I chuckled, and he looked over to flash me a smile.

“Did you see Cody’s ride?” he asked.

I nodded my head slowly. “Yeah, she got her leg out there and spurred the fuck outta him.”

“She did it just like Renato told her,” he said. “Bastard’s not even here and he still showed us both up.”

“Yeah, but that’s Cody for ya,” I pointed out. “She hears all we say, throws out what doesn’t work for her, and adapts the rest. That’s what’s got half these boys so scared.”

Then Ty sobered. “She was with Jake earlier.”

“Yup,” I agreed. “I asked him and a few others to keep an eye on her this weekend.”

“Brazil is too,” Ty assured me. “But fuck, J.D. Why Jake?”

“Because he’s not an idiot?” I looked at him in confusion. “Why?”

He just grunted and leaned back to check the line of bulls again. “Because he’s the guy who always tries to hit on my girls.”

Right. Yeah, and it sounded like Ty was feeling a little insecure about Cody lately, so I could see that hurting his balls a little. Well, too bad for him. Kaleb had warned me that Austin was talkin’ a lot of shit, so I’d rather bruise some pride than have Cody’s face take the pain.

“Austin’s got a hate on for her,” I told him. “Jake’s nothin’ but eyes, man. Promise.”

“You got all your cronies looking out for her or something?” Ty asked.

I scoffed at that. “Yeah, I wish I had cronies. Mostly, I’m just smart enough to use their ego against ‘em. Jake wants to see if she’s all that. I told him he’d get a real good look from the gate while he holds her hat. Got called a few names, but she’s got her hat, and ain’t no one fucked with her yet.”

“Starting to see a whole new side to you, J.D.,” Ty teased just as the first chute finally opened and the rider came out with a bang.

For a whole three seconds, I swore the guy was going to pull it off. Sadly, at six, he took a face full of dirt, but the next one was already up. That meant it was time for Ty to get serious, but he knew the drill as well as I did. Passing his rope to the chute guy, the attendants finally started working it under the bull without a second thought.

Jaxon Cade went out next, and things were starting to move again. In the chute beside us, one of the guys was now on the gate, working to get the rope tight enough. Beside me, Ty strapped his helmet onto his head. The moment the chute beside us opened, Ty was over the rails and balancing himself over the bull.

For just a moment I paused to watch as Tanner hovered at the edge of the arena. The look on his face was pure intensity. His eyes were locked on the bull, doing his job. That straw hat on his head made the line of his jaw look sharp, just the way I liked ‘em. Then, once the buzzer sounded, he moved in to get to work.

Damn, those guys were a bit wild. When the rider hit the ground, Tanner slipped between him to distract the bull, probably saving the rider’s ass. Jorge shifted the other way, getting Tanner out of the mess he’d just put himself in. Then, in only a handful of seconds, they had the beast under control and heading for the gate.

That was when I stepped over. Ty handed me the tail of his rope, and then started warming it. The first time he pulled, I damned near tipped forward. That earned me a warning look,

but I hadn't expected him to be quite that strong. Then again, Ty wasn't one of us little guys.

He was tall for a bull rider, and built. It was what made all the women notice him, but it didn't do him no favors on the back of a bull. I knew it, and I was pretty sure he did too, so I wasn't about to rub his face in it. Not like any of us could change how we were made. Instead, I braced my legs a little better, then nodded to show him I could take it.

Ty yanked hard this time. His glove slid the whole way down, that rosin stringing off as if it was trying to prove it was there. Again, and again, Ty ran his hand over his rope. Then, he turned his attention to the handle. That got a few tugs, and then he was gesturing for me to tighten it all up.

I pulled, he shifted, getting his handle right where he wanted. From the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of pink, but I didn't want to look away. I also didn't want Ty to miss that he was being watched.

"You got a fan club," I told him.

"The girl from the bar?" he asked.

"No, dipshit. Cody."

And now I was wondering what girl. Was that why he'd been out looking at the crowd? Was he already sick of this shit? More importantly, if he was, how the hell would Cody take it? Fuck, and if he was dumb enough to cheat on her?

"You'd better not stick your dick in the wrong hole," I warned him.

Ty laughed. "Been working to avoid her," he promised. "Lacey, not Cody. Now give me that."

I passed him his tail, waited to make sure he wasn't going to have a problem, then stepped back over. I was barely out of the way when his bull decided to do a little shuffle. Ty snarled in frustration, partially undid his wrap, then worked it back into place.

"You good?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah," he said as he eased himself down.

“Then fucking ride like it,” I taunted him.

Ty didn't bother answering. He just nodded. The latch to the gate clanked. The door began to swing open. The bull Ty was on bucked, but the damned thing forgot to take itself out first. Ty got one big hop in the chute, and then the bull made it out of there ass first. Ty tilted, and for a second, I was sure this was about to be a bad wreck.

Tanner managed one single step closer. Jorge shifted, braced to wave off the bull and take its attention. Isaac moved to match Tanner, and then Ty heaved himself back to center with nothing more than the force of his will.

Cody fell in right at my side, her eyes locked out on the area. “Get back up,” she breathed. “C'mon, Ty, get back up.”

Fuck if her words weren't working too. Ty pulled himself back to where he needed to be, keeping his free arm far enough out that there was no fear of a slap. Then, the next time the bull's heels went up, he let it push him forward, right down onto his hand. Like he was trying to show off a little, Ty even spurred.

“Damn,” I breathed as the bull began to spin to the right.

“Get in there,” Cody was mumbling. “Ride him, Ty.”

“Louder,” I told her.

So she screamed, “Ride 'em, Ty!”

And he did. For the first time in far too long, Ty took over. He stopped being a comfortable passenger on the back of a bull, and he became the driver. With the strength of his arm, he held himself right where he needed to be. His legs were running up the side of the bull, both keeping him steady and earning him points. Even better, the harder he rode, the more this bull gave.

“Yes!” I roared as the buzzer went off.

But the dismount wasn't pretty. Ty's bull didn't know when to quit. Just as he released the end of his tail, that beast gave an impressive leap into the air, sending Ty down hard. I watched as he hit the ground on his back, but Isaac was there,

jumping over him to give him a shield. Tanner was all over the bull, luring it away while Jorge shifted to make sure it couldn't double back.

Ty took a second, but he made it to his knees and crawled a pace before he could find his feet. Thankfully, once he did, he hauled his ass right back into the open chute and halfway up the rails, smiling when he saw Cody right in front of him.

“And that is how it's done!” the announcer was yelling. “Let's take another look at that ride.”

“That,” Cody told him, pointing back to the big screen with the replay, “was amazing.”

Still hanging there on the side, Ty turned to watch. One hand popped the straps on his helmet, then pulled it off. The whole time, his ride was played back in slow motion, letting the audience get a second chance to see just how it was done.

“Which has earned him a score of 90.25!” the announcer said. “Let's hear it for Ty McBride!”

“Fuck yeah!” Ty roared, punching out at the air before stepping all the way over.

Then he grabbed Cody and spun her around. She laughed, almost as excited as he was, but it didn't go unnoticed. The cameras were on him, so Ty turned to me and slapped the shit out of my arm just as Tanner made his way into the chute.

“Ty!” he called, lifting up Ty's rope.

Ty leaned down to take it. “Thanks, man. Good save.”

“Damned good ride,” Tanner told him.

The pair shared a fist bump with Cody grinning at both in excitement, and the scoreboard moved Ty up to the number one spot. That was how I'd been trying to tell him to ride. It was how he'd give me a damned run for my money. There was just one problem with all of this.

Standing a few chutes down, looking like he was getting ready for his own ride, Austin was glaring at us like he was plotting murder.

CHAPTER 20



FROM NINTH TO FIRST, there was a bit of a lull. The three of us tried our best to stay out of the way, but Cheyenne wasn't really set up the way I was used to. The chutes didn't attach to the seating area. Nope, that was on the other side of the race track. At the sides were the good seats, but the only way to get there from here was to walk at the edge of the paneled-off arena area.

In other words, we bull riders were all packed into a very narrow walkway that let people pass between the chutes. It was twice as wide as usual, which meant we weren't all colliding, but the number of us wanting to watch made it pretty damned crowded. Soon enough, Ty said he was going to take his stuff back. Since he was currently sitting in first place, it sounded like there was a chance he'd get pulled down into the arena for the closing ceremony.

I waved him off, promising that I'd take care of J.D. Ty smirked at me, pointing out the other way my words could be taken, then headed for the stairs. On my other side, J.D. was just staring out into the arena. Following his eyes, I found Tanner's purple jersey.

"Subtle," I teased. "Real subtle, J.D."

"You ever watched him before?" he asked, glancing over at me.

So I matched J.D.'s pose against the back side, and focused on the man who was technically my boyfriend. Tanner was cute. He wasn't stunning or distractingly sexy. He was

cute, but in that way I liked. Where J.D. was lean, being nothing but ripcords of muscle, Tanner was a bit broader. His chest was muscular and his legs were nice and thick. I only knew that because I'd seen him in a pair of jeans, though. Well, and naked.

For just a moment, my mind went back to that night. The way Tanner had rolled me onto my back, kissing me until I was sure I couldn't breathe. How easily he'd shifted between my legs. The feel of him pressed up against my back that first time. His confidence, and how he'd taken complete control in the darkness, without ever being brutal or rough about it.

"You're smiling like a girl with a crush," J.D. warned me

"Fuck off," I grumbled.

"Looks good on ya," J.D. promised. "You two are cute."

But from the way he caught my eye, I knew he didn't necessarily just mean as a couple. He was saying he thought each of us was cute. Biting my lower lip, my eyes dropped to the ground, but I didn't have a single thing to say back. At least not that wouldn't make problems if someone else heard.

Then J.D. bumped my arm. "That," he said, pointing.

A rider had just hit the dirt, and Tanner was right in there. The man had no fear of the bulls, and the way he worked them proved it. When the beast turned back to make his rider pay, Tanner darted across. That was when I realized it was always Tanner first.

But the bull was too close. A swipe of its head had Tanner's feet off the ground. I sucked in a breath and stood straighter as my boyfriend flew into the air. Isaac moved in, tapping the bull's horn to make it turn. Jorge hung back, keeping his attention on everything at the same time. But when Tanner's feet hit the ground and he was moving like nothing happened, the trio reformed around the bull.

The whole time, the cowboy was trying to get his ass out of the way. These bulls had a tendency to smash anything they could reach, but the truth was they just wanted to go back to their hay. So while the rider went one way, the bullfighters got

the animal turned the other, and the staff on the ground opened the gate to let it out.

Still bucking, snorting, and kicking, the bull decided to take it. Sadly, the rider was bent over at the side of the arena, clearly hurting a bit. Like clockwork, sports medicine hurried out to check on him, and J.D. leaned in to bump my shoulder.

“You were worried. Admit it.”

“A little worried,” I admitted, knowing he was talking about Tanner getting tossed. “Just like I would be if it was you getting thrown around.”

“Babe, I prefer to do the riding,” J.D. teased before jerking his head to the side. “And I’m up soon enough.”

Together, we headed over to gather his things and then find his chute. A check of the scoreboard showed I was fourth place, and the last group of bulls were now being moved in. All around us, people began moving. Most were heading for the back, aware they weren’t going to place today. Some were still parked out, wanting to enjoy the show. Most were just making space for the last set of riders, though.

J.D. found his stuff where he’d placed it at the side. “Hold,” he ordered.

I took his helmet and rope, but he had his glove and tape. Shoving his hand into the glove, J.D. wiggled his fingers all the way down to the ends, then began taping up the end tight around his forearm. While he focused on that, I looked over to check the order of go. There was a little ruckus going on, but nothing too bad - and then the chute opened.

“Fourth is riding,” I told him.

He nodded and just kept taping, adding a lot more than I ever had. When J.D. was finally happy with it, he passed me the roll of tape, and took his helmet. I quickly shoved his tape into my back pocket, because I knew what came next. Sure enough, he thrust his hat at me and put the helmet on, wiggling it a few times to make sure it fit just the way he wanted.

“Here’s a tip for ya,” he said. “Getting your hair jacked wrong, or your shirt in your glove, or anything else that

bothers ya, will make ya ride like shit.” And then he began fastening the straps to hold his helmet on.

I just set his hat on one of the posts beside us. “Uh huh. Having this much hair, I’d never guess that.” Then I stuck my tongue out at him.

J.D. leaned in to snag his rope off my shoulder, putting his face up close to mine. “Tease,” he whispered.

Ok, I was grinning. I also liked the way that made a couple of butterflies take off in my stomach. There was just something about J.D. that caught me off guard, and I liked it. He always found some way to make me feel pretty, feminine, and yet still tough.

Then he slapped my arm and took off towards his chute. Like a lost little puppy, I followed behind him, knowing he’d need help. If I was his rookie - a title I was starting to not only embrace but also be proud of - then I was going to make sure he strapped in right.

“Hey,” I said just as we reached his bull, “if you beat Ty’s score, I’m buying your beer tonight.”

That got me a grin, hidden behind the grill of his helmet. “We gonna play with the regulars tonight?”

The next rider burst out of his chute. The clanking and banging of the gate was loud, but not enough to distract me. “I think we should,” I agreed.

J.D. nodded once, and then passed his rope over to the attendants. While they did their thing, he paused to glance at the scoreboard. That made me look, and I finally paused to see the rankings. I was still sitting in fourth with a score of 88.0. Ty was currently in first place with his 90.25, and there were only two riders left to go.

I barely thought it before the chute beside us opened, and the bull rushed out with a bang. One hoof hit the back wall, and the resulting sound was loud enough to make J.D.’s bull jump in place. J.D.’s rope slipped. The men trying to get it under the beast cursed and then started all over.

Right about the time they got it on, J.D. moved into place. I intended to step over, but a hand grabbed me, holding me back. “Not until the bull’s out of the arena,” Gustavo warned.

I looked back to find he was the one holding me in place. A moment of confusion hit, wondering what he was doing here, but it seemed that quite a few of the riders had come up to watch J.D. When I nodded, Gustavo let go. And yet the moment the bull was out of the arena, I stepped over. The tail of J.D.’s rope was waiting.

I grabbed that, braced my feet, and pulled. J.D. gestured for me to yank a little harder. Trying my best, I put my legs into all of it. The rope tightened just enough for J.D. to reach over and start warming it up. The first yank I handled. The second made me work for it. But on the third yank, Monologue decided that he didn’t like this game at all.

The bull humped up and kicked up its back end. J.D. rocked forward. I tried to hold, but between one second and the next, the tension on the rope just let go.

For a split second, I was sure I was about to fall backwards. I tried to save myself, but the rope in my hands didn’t pull me back up when I scrambled for it. Then J.D.’s hand grabbed my wrist. It was just enough to keep me from tumbling down onto the sand. For just a moment, J.D. and I stared at each other, trying to figure out what the fuck was going on.

The problem was I still had half his rope in my hands. His bull had settled back down, and J.D. was standing over its back, his feet braced on the rails. My mind was spinning, but the frayed end told me enough.

“Get that rope off that bull!” I ordered, hurrying back over the chute. “It broke. It’s useless.”

The attendants actually listened, but I was now a girl on a mission. Ignoring the bigger cowboys around me, I wove through all of them. When I bumped someone a little too hard, he cursed at me, but that wasn’t enough to slow me down. Not until I reached my own gear. There, hanging beside my pretty

pink helmet, surrounded by all the gear of the Brazilians, was my own bull rope.

A twist and a pull got that free, and then I started running. This time, the other riders got the fuck out of my way. Clearly, they could recognize a woman with a purpose! The metal of the temporary walkway clanked loudly under my feet, but when I got back to J.D.'s chute, it was just as they got the rope away from the bull.

"Put this one on," I demanded, and then hurried back over. "J.D., you're using my rope," I told him.

"Little smaller," he realized. "Handle works both ways?"

"Yep," I promised.

Which was when Ty appeared to take the broken rope. Catching my eye over the chutes, he lifted up the severed end. Like this, one thing was very, very clear. Half of it had been cut. The line was just too clean to be a normal tear or fray.

"And someone didn't want you to make this ride," I told J.D.

He just cackled in that crazy way he had. "Yeah, well, fuck 'em," he promised.

So as soon as I got the tail of the rope, I used all that adrenaline to pull even harder. Monologue thrashed, but fuck if I was letting go. J.D. repeated the process of warming the rope, then the handle. When he was ready, I passed him the tail. As he wrapped that around his hand, I caught a little smile touch his lips, but I was already making my way back to the safe side.

Ty caught my arm, helping me down just as J.D. smacked his fingers closed. Then, in a single smooth motion, he dropped onto the bull's back, right up by his hand, and nodded. The gate swung open fast.

Monologue came out hard. The bull's front feet were almost over the chutes, and the rest of him followed. J.D. humped up, riding it like he was born there, but shifted when that much mass crashed back down to earth. He didn't seem to care. He just rode.

The bull spun to the left, which was out of J.D.'s hand, and for the first time I got to just watch. I was waiting for something else to go wrong, for my rope to give out, or for J.D. to not be able to hold on to something that tiny. He, however, didn't seem to care. The man just dragged his heels over Monologue's sides, working for bigger and then even *bigger* bucks.

"Damn," Ty breathed beside me.

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. Like this, J.D. was a force of nature. It was as if gravity had no effect on him. The only problem was that his bull couldn't keep up. While J.D. drove that animal around the other way, taking complete control of the ride - and making it look like he was on a docile little pony instead of a one-ton animal - the bull was wearing out fast.

The rears were lower. The bucks got flatter. J.D. just kept pushing and pushing until the pyrotechnics at the back went off and the buzzer sounded. Then, he just opened his hand and my delicate little bull rope slipped right out. For one more buck, J.D. rode without even bothering to hold on, and then he hopped off the side.

Tanner rushed in. Isaac got the bull this time, turning it back. Jorge took over next, but J.D. was already skipping his way back to the chutes, completely unconcerned about the bull still out there. He was also grinning like a maniac.

"And that!" he told us, "Is how you get'er done!" But when he hopped up onto the chutes to climb back over, he paused to slap Ty's arm. "And grats. You outrode me, because that fucker needs a damned diet."

Sure enough, on the scoreboard J.D.'s score was listed as 88.50, only half a point higher than me, putting him down in third place.

CHAPTER 21



IN THE END, Ty won for the night. Sitting with a healthy lead in first place, he had at least a point on the next rider down. I came out in fifth after J.D.'s ride, which wasn't too bad, in my opinion. J.D. was third. The strange thing was that when he saw what was left of his bull rope, he didn't seem to care. I would've. Shit, I would've been pissed.

J.D. simply agreed that someone must've cut it, promised he had at least a dozen more, and that it was fine. His eyes also scanned the bull riders around us as he said it. I had a feeling he knew more than he was saying. At the same time, this was J.D. If he didn't want to talk about it, I was pretty sure nothing I could say would make him.

But I was stripping out of my chaps when Tanner peeked his head into the locker room where J.D. had set us up. He ducked back out, then returned, almost as if he hadn't expected to see my ass pointed at him. Chuckling softly, Tanner sauntered the rest of the way in just to run his hand over my rump.

I sucked in a breath but didn't pull away. Nope, I kept working on the buckles holding these things to my legs until I could finally get them off. Then, tossing them onto the bench where my bag sat, I turned to face my official boyfriend.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He raked his eyes over me. "Damn, Cody. You look like a professional bull rider."

I playfully smacked his chest. "I am one."

“Yeah, and you need to stop in at sports medicine,” he said, shifting closer. “Doc said tonight.”

My brow wrinkled in confusion, but J.D. chuckled as if he knew exactly what Tanner was talking about. “Do it,” he told me.

So I tossed my hands in the air. “Fine!”

“Also,” Tanner added, “the guys are heading to this bar up the road. Guess everyone is? I thought I could ride with them since I feel like I’m blowing them off a bit.”

“Go,” J.D. told him. “I’ll make sure she gets there.”

“Or Ty,” Kaleb said as he sauntered into the room. “I wouldn’t let that asshole near my girl if I was you, Tanner.”

“And I know my place,” Tanner shot back. “It’s why I’m the only one in this room with a girl. If Cody’s gonna leave me for Ty, then being stupid about it won’t stop her. Just means I’ve fucked up. If I trust her, well...” He flashed me a smile. “Then maybe I’ll get an invite back to her room.”

“And you know Ty will fuck anything,” Kaleb pointed out.

“Still takes two to tango,” Tanner told him. “Here’s a little tip, boy. Women are more impressed with trust than possession. Cody isn’t a toy. She’s not here to amuse me. I can chase Ty off all I want - or I can accept that he’s Cody’s friend.”

“Who wants to fuck her,” Kaleb said.

Tanner shrugged. “So does half the PBR. Now stop and think about that for a second. Then you tell me how happy she’ll be if I’m saying she can’t talk to J.D., Ty, you, the fans...” He lifted a brow.

“That!” I said, pointing at Tanner. “That’s why I said yes.”

“And I’ll make sure you don’t regret it,” Tanner told me before stealing a quick kiss. “But go see Dr. Stephens real fast. He said something about birth control and traveling.”

I sucked in a breath because that hadn’t even crossed my mind. “Shit, yes!”

“And I’ll get her to the bar,” J.D. promised. “I’ll also watch your shit, Cody.”

“Ok.” I patted J.D.’s back, snagged one more kiss from Tanner - since that was allowed - and then hurried out of the room.

The halls were twisting and easy to get lost in, but the walk gave me a chance to text my dad that I was ok. He sent back that I’d had a good ride, then told me to go out and have fun with my new boyfriend. In other words, he’d seen Tanner’s kiss too.

On the concrete walls around me, the banners for the PBR were hung everywhere. I was pretty sure that was for when the cameras followed someone behind the chutes, which happened to the guys quite a bit. Thankfully, there were also little arrows pointing to sports medicine. I followed those.

When I finally reached the right place, Djalu Fox, one of the few Australian riders, almost opened the door into my face. I gasped, he was startled, and then the man moved out of the way and held the door for me to pass through. I tipped my head in thanks, he did the same, and that was that.

But inside, the front room was filled with what looked like large recliners. All of them hummed softly with a whooshing sound. Cowboys filled them. Most of the guys had their shirts off. Some had their pants off. From the packs around their joints, it didn’t take much to realize they were all having injuries iced down. The lack of clothing was a little awkward, though.

“Doc’s with someone.” That was a voice I recognized, so I turned to see Jake with his riding arm wrapped in ice - and his entire chest exposed.

“I really feel like I should be covering my eyes,” I admitted.

He playfully flexed his pecs, one after the other. “Oh, baby,” he teased.

Yep, I slapped my hand over my face, which made someone else laugh, but it was enough to get me noticed. A

giant of a man walked out of a room at the side. Stormed out was more like it, right up until he saw me. That was enough to make him relax and offer me a hand.

“Anthony, physical therapy,” he introduced himself.

I took it, aware that not only did his hand dwarf mine, but his skin was beautifully dark. It may have been stupid, but I hadn’t expected to see a Black man working with the PBR. Not because I thought he couldn’t do it, but in my experience, certain aspects of country culture were very sexist, and often racist.

“I’m Cody Jennings,” I told him. “I was told Dr. Stephens wanted to see me.”

“Ah,” he breathed. “Right.”

“Didn’t even fall off a bull and already needing to get fixed up?” one of the guys taunted.

I turned back to find a rider I didn’t recognize. That meant he wasn’t in the top twenty, but I didn’t care. “Look, you worry about how little your dick is, and I’ll worry about taking care of myself, hm?”

“Shut it, Casey,” Anthony told him. Then he gestured for me to follow him. “I have a room at the back for you.”

“Oh, just for me?” I asked, walking in when he held the door.

“Not just,” Anthony admitted as he followed me in. “If someone’s hurt too bad, we give them private space. You, on the other hand, will get it when you come in.”

“I’m really not trying to get special treatment,” I assured him.

Anthony just pointed at a chair. “The most common injuries to bull riders are elbows and knees. Sometimes abdomen, if you get stepped on. All of those mean getting undressed, and half of these boys are barely out of high school,” he told me.

“And you?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Cody, I’ve been out of college longer than most of you have been out of high school. I’m probably ten years older than you.”

“Twenty-two,” I told him.

He bobbed his head. “Ok, eight. Just turned thirty. All I’m saying is that I remember being their age, so yes, we’re making plans for you in here. Besides, it’s easier to admit it hurts when you don’t feel like you’re keeping up with the boys.”

“True,” I relented. “But do you know what Dr. Stephens wanted? Tanner said something about birth control?”

“That’s more than I knew,” he admitted. “Just get comfy, and as soon as he has his latest patient handled, I’ll send him in.”

I sat in the chair for what felt like an eternity, kicking my legs under me just for something to do. If there had’ve been a clock in here, I probably would’ve been going crazy at the ticking of the second hand. Moments passed, then more. Eventually, someone tapped at the door and opened it.

“Cody?” Dr. Stephens asked, as he stepped inside.

I’d only met him once when I’d smashed my nose on my first ride, but he looked exactly the same. Unlike most physicians, Dr. Stephens wore a western shirt that declared his place with sports medicine, and where a last name would be on the back, his simply said, “Doctor.”

“Hi, Dr. Stephens,” I greeted him.

He moved over to a stool beside a card table. “Ok, since it looks like you’re going to be sticking with us for a while, I wanted to go over a few things.” He pulled out a few supplies, laying them on the table to prove this wasn’t going to be only a chat. “To start with, can we talk about sexually transmitted infections?”

“Oh, god,” I groaned, bracing for this to get bad.

“Look, I am only bringing this up because your partners have all come in to get tested. I would assume that means

you'd want to as well, but it's not required."

"What?" I asked.

He flashed me a knowing smile. "Cody, the PBR isn't that big. I know what bars the riders go to. I'm well aware of what happens after the events. I also have earned the trust of these guys, and I'm hoping I'll be able to earn yours. You see, I am a doctor. My specialty is in medicine related to athletic injuries, but I'm licensed as a family practitioner as well. In other words, I'm the family doctor for most of the people on this wild ride."

"Gotcha," I said.

So he propped his elbow up on that card table and turned to face me. "I also know you're a healthy young woman. I can guess you're using some form of birth control, and I know just how hard it is to get a doctor to fill that without an exam. However, I can prescribe it, or administer. I just don't really keep up on the types." He lifted a finger. "What I'm saying is that if you tell me what you want, I'll make sure you can get it."

"I use depo," I told him. "The shot."

"Easy enough," he promised, making a quick note. "And STI testing, did you want me to run that as well?"

"What does it require?" I asked, trying to imagine propping my legs up for a gyno exam.

"Just a blood test," he promised. "I send it out to one of the local hospitals, with the tubes marked with numbers. When I get the results back, I'll call you to let you know if you have anything to worry about."

"Ok," I agreed. "Sounds good. I mean, there's no downside, right?"

"Exactly," he said.

Then he stood and began to gather up those supplies he'd pulled out. "If you'd like to roll up your sleeve, I can do that right now, actually."

I worked free the button at my cuff, then tried to shove the whole thing higher. When it got stuck, I gave up and went for the buttons on the front. Dr. Stephens was busy getting his tubes out, but when he turned back, I was peeling myself half out of my shirt. Beneath, I wore a tank, just like always.

“Ok,” he said, wrapping a band around my bicep and picking up the needle. “Stick.”

I looked away just as the pinch hit. Pulling in a breath, I made myself relax, and Dr. Stephens kept talking. “Also, your paperwork gives me the right to release basic updates about your health to the public. That means whether you’re in stable condition after an accident. In the event of a death, the family is told first, but the fans like to know if you’re serious or going to be ok.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed.

“The rest of what we do is confidential,” he told me, his voice turning serious. “Cody, I don’t care how many people you sleep with, in what order, or anything else. I’m not going to tell you not to ride bulls - or that you should. My only job here is to keep you as healthy as possible, ok?”

“Ok,” I agreed.

He just snorted out a laugh and shook his head. “I am trying my hardest to make you relax, and you just keep giving me the one-word replies.”

I turned to check his progress. “I mean, what else am I supposed to say?”

Dr. Stephens was finishing up. After pulling out the needle, he put a band-aid on my arm, then patted my shoulder. “I’m just worried that if you twist your knee in bed with someone, you won’t say anything. If you get in a car wreck and have whiplash, you won’t let me know. I’m trying to say I handle all of that, and I will do what I can to take care of you, or send you to someone who can do it better, ok?”

“I try not to get myself in too much trouble,” I told him as I shoved my arm back into my sleeve.

“And I still had three men come in to get their blood drawn,” he replied. “It’s ok to talk about it. Questions, concerns, or anything else.”

“So, you know?” I asked.

He nodded. “That’s what I’m saying. I know a lot of what goes on behind the scenes, even the things I shouldn’t. Now, I’m not sure what you four are doing, but I know that until I get these back, you need to make sure they use condoms. You hear me?”

“They have been,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks heating up.

“No blushing,” he said. “This is not a place to be embarrassed. Besides, if you pull the wrong muscle, I’m the one who’ll be giving you the excuse to tell the public. If you’re not sure how to do something, I have charts. If you’re feeling pressured, abused, or anything else, I will be the one sending Anthony out to handle it.”

That was what made me laugh. “He’s kinda big.”

“He’s also one of the best physical therapists I’ve met in a very long time,” Dr. Stephens assured me. “So, think of us more like your big brothers, here to beat up the boys for you, keep your secrets, and encourage you to be a little more crazy out there. Think you can handle that?”

I had just finished buttoning my shirt back together. “So, you’re not trying to convince me I shouldn’t do this?”

He shook his head. “Cody, I don’t know how to break this to you, but you *are* doing it. I’m just here to make sure you can *keep* doing it.” Then he canted his head and smiled. “And them, because it sounds like someone might be the center of attention.”

“Working on it,” I promised. “Right now, I’m just fumbling around. Dr. Stephens - “

“Doc,” he told me. “That’s what most of the guys call me.”

“Well, Doc, the truth is that back home, no one approved of what I’m doing. They actually laughed at me for even

trying. I had no idea these guys would give me a chance - let alone wanna *date* me. Now this?"

"Gonna tell me what 'this' is yet?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I know. I..."

"What's your sexual history like?" he asked.

I grimaced. "Um, I had one guy back home. Two on tour."

"So it's all new and exciting," he realized. Then, bending over his knees, he turned serious. "Cody, sex is something that should feel good. If you feel any kind of pain, stop. If there's blood - and not menstrual - then stop. If it isn't working for you, come talk to me. I may not have the answers, but I do know where to find them. The whole point? Sex should be a good thing, completely on your terms, and if it's not? You come talk to me. I don't care if that's asking about triple penetration, painful periods, or anything else. See, I might be a doctor, but I'm the cool kind, and my job is to take care of you."

"Yeah," I breathed. "Thanks, Doc. I might not know what I'm doing, but so far, I don't have any complaints. I just don't wanna get distracted from why I'm really here, which is to make sure I get a check."

"Good," he told me. "And so you know, my job's to make sure you can keep getting that check too. Now go play with your boys. I think you've earned a little fun."

CHAPTER 22



WHEN WE GOT FINISHED with the event, Jorge and Isaac dragged me back to the RV. The plan was to hit up the bar where everyone else would be hanging out, but I knew that meant Cody would be there. So, while they focused on getting out of their protective gear, I found a pair of jeans. I was pretty sure I'd left my boots at the hotel, but I had my Chuck Taylor's. Like my jersey, they were purple.

Once the guys saw what I was wearing, they went with a version of the same. It was a little more casual than what we wore in the arena. Plus, considering our pants were designed to go around padding, they didn't fit well without it. The best part, however, was that none of them gave me shit.

Isaac drove over to the bar. The plan - like always - was to crash in the parking lot if we got too fucked up, and to drive back to the hotel if we weren't. Granted, Jorge also had his phone glued to his face, which meant Aubree was messaging him, so I claimed the passenger seat for the short ride over.

"You going home with one of them?" Isaac asked.

I just shrugged. "No idea."

"You should," he told me. "I mean, if J.D. is serious at all..."

Yeah, and that was the problem. "I have no clue what I'm doing," I told him. "I just know I like her, he's cute, and Ty's not being a dick. So, I'm thinking that, at worst, I have a chance with the girl."

"She's sweet," Isaac told me.

“Fuck off,” I grumbled.

“No,” he insisted. “I’m saying she’s your type. Tanner, you’re sweet. You’re not some hothead like half these riders. You’re not looking to get your dick sucked and move on. To Cody, that probably counts as sweet, and she’s the kind of girl who’ll actually appreciate that.”

“You think so?” I asked.

He nodded even as he turned this beast of a vehicle into the parking lot. “You like her, huh?”

“Probably more than I should,” I admitted.

He killed the engine but didn’t immediately hop out. “Look, she’s a good rider. She’s great in the arena. There’s just one problem with this thing you two are doing, so I’m gonna throw it in your face.”

“What’s that?”

“Us,” he told me, “because we’re in a different town every week, living in this piece of shit, and busy with all our male bonding. Thing is, we don’t fucking need it, and I think you need her.”

“Need?” I scoffed.

That was when Jorge leaned over my seat. “Need,” he told me. “There’s not a damned thing wrong with needing a woman, either. Gives you something to work for. Someone to watch over. A good reason to think before you try to get tossed again.”

“But she doesn’t agree,” I told them. “See, that’s the thing with Cody. She gets what I do. She doesn’t see me as the help or the backup entertainment. She sees bullfighting as being no different than bull riding.”

“Knew I liked her,” Isaac teased.

I grunted at that. “I also know that if it comes down to me or Ty? Yeah, she’ll choose Ty.”

“Wouldn’t bet money on that,” Isaac told me. “Ty’s a pig. I mean, sure, he’s supporting her riding, but would he if she

wasn't flirting with him? Sleeping with him?"

"He would," Jorge said. "Ty was cheering her on before he thought he had a chance. I think he's honest about that."

"He's still a celebrity," I reminded them, "and I'm not."

"Nope," Jorge said. "You're the kind of man women wanna marry. Ty? He's the kind they won't tell their parents about. A fling. A little excitement. Nothing more."

"It's not a competition," Isaac told me. "I'm just curious about you and J.D., though. I mean, you said he kissed you?"

"And nothing since?" Jorge asked.

Yep, I loved these guys. Both of them were a few years older than me, but they'd never treated me like an idiot. Instead, they'd become the big brothers I'd always wanted. Maybe that was why we worked so well. Or maybe it was just that the three of us were more alike than we wanted to admit. Either way, I had nothing to hide from them. Didn't work that way with us.

"I think he backed off so I could get Cody's attention," I said. "I could be wrong, but she made a comment on our date about him being a good friend."

"Or maybe he's as intimidated as you are," Isaac told me. "I mean, one cute girl is hard enough. A cute girl and a cute guy?"

"Are you calling me cute?" I teased.

He laughed. "Sure, Tanner. You're cute. I mean, so are dogs."

"Aubree says cute," Jorge told me. "Granted, she thinks J.D. is 'so not her type.'"

"Are you trying to do the poly thing?" I asked him.

But Jorge grabbed the door at the back and pulled it open. "Nope, I'm trying to do the beer thing, and maybe be a half-decent wingman."

"Been a long time since you were any good at that," Isaac told him.

I climbed out the door on my side to add, “So if I spend the weekend in the hotel, neither of you will care?”

“Nope,” they replied in unison.

I nodded as the three of us headed towards the front door of the bar. “Then I’m going for it.”

“Thought you already had ‘it,’” Isaac joked.

“The other it,” I told him.

“Thank fuck,” Jorge groaned, reaching over to give Isaac a high five. “Real sleep tonight.”

“Assholes,” I told them. “Both of you.”

But I knew they weren’t trying to run me out of the room, and they knew I wasn’t serious. Still, when I walked into the bar to hear the country music blasting and was confronted with nothing but sponsor patches everywhere, it felt good. Like home, in a way. This was Cheyenne, and every time I’d been here, I swore it had been a little better than the last.

“Matadors!” someone called out.

That made half the crowd turn around and cheer out a greeting. “Bullfighters,” Jorge shot back. “I’m Latino, not Spanish!”

Then a woman called out, “Drinks on me!”

That drew my eye to the bar. J.D. had claimed his regular spot, right up front and in the middle of it all. This time, however, Cody was at his side. Like this, the pair of them looked a little dangerous. It also looked like Cody was keeping the buckle bunnies away, even if she hadn’t realized it yet.

“Cody!” I called out, heading that way.

She turned, smiling at the sound of her name, then it got even bigger when she saw me. “Tanner!”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Isaac told her.

“Beers?” she asked, pointing at all three of us. “My treat.”

“Your daddy trained you right,” Jorge told her. “So sure.”

Cody turned back to the bar, holding up 4 fingers. I moved behind her, catching her waist so I could lean in close. “Saw you almost fall off the chute earlier.”

“J.D.’s rope broke,” she told me.

I caught his eye next. “Also saw you grab her.”

Because that was putting it mildly. The man’s full attention should’ve been on his bull, yet the moment Cody had tilted, he’d jumped off its back to grab her. I was pretty sure she had no idea how focused he was on her, but I knew, and he needed to know that I knew.

“Can’t have my rookie’s ass on the ground,” he told me, making it sound casual.

I nodded once to show I accepted that. “And where’s Ty?”

Cody waved to the far side of the bar. “He’s doing his thing.”

“On it,” Isaac said.

Because Ty’s thing tended to be female, cheap, and easy. Beautiful too, but that rarely negated the other three. Once he got his beer, Isaac headed that way, and Jorge went with him. Those two knew all about the insanity and complications of my mess with Cody, so I was hoping they were headed over to give him an excuse to not fuck things up.

The truth was that I liked Ty. Yeah, he was tall, buff, and sexy. That could’ve had something to do with it, but mostly it was that he was just a good guy. He got in his own way a lot, and he tried really hard to be a piece of shit like everyone else in the PBR, but he really wasn’t. Ty talked to the kids. He flirted with the moms. He knew how to work this game, and he was good at it.

But he was also damned good on a bull. Not serious enough most days, and he made a pretty penny for doing jack-all. Still, I’d never had an issue with him. Not until that first day at the hotel. Now, I wasn’t sure how he felt about me, but with Cody tying us together, we’d need to eventually figure it out.

Then Cody tapped my arm. “Did you see?” she asked.

I shook my head, unsure of what she was talking about. “Maybe?”

“I’m in fifth!” she squealed. “Only half a point behind J.D.”

“And Austin’s in between us,” J.D. told me. “That has to chap his ass a bit.”

“Shit, all he’ll see is that he’s ahead of Cody,” I pointed out.

But she didn’t seem to care about that. “Still, I almost scored as good as him, and all because of our date!”

Wait, what? “How?” I asked, because she’d completely lost me.

“The mechanical bull,” she insisted, those pretty blue eyes of hers shining with excitement. “I figured out how to balance and spur!”

“And here I thought I was just looking like an idiot for your amusement,” I teased.

Cody wrapped her arm around my waist and leaned in. “Nope, you’re keeping me safe.”

That. Wow, she’d just put my feelings into words. That was what I liked so much about this girl. She let me be her hero. Not just J.D. and Ty. Not the fancy bull riders who got all the attention, but me, the Iowa boy in the baggy clothes who preferred to run around the bulls rather than sit on them.

And yes, I really did want to keep her safe. Not because I didn’t think she was doing a damned good job of it herself. This was different. It was deeper, like a dog guarding his bone. It was also reciprocal, since I knew that having her hanging on my side was making it very clear to all these guys that I liked women plenty. They didn’t need to know about the rest.

On Cody’s other side, J.D. had clearly had enough alcohol to get into a mood. “Hey!” he yelled out at the room. “Who got bucked off tonight?”

A few guys lifted their hands, so J.D. waved to the bartender. “A round for all of them.”

“Oh, me!” I said, lifting my hand.

“And him,” J.D. added, “because I saw you catch air at least once, Tanner.”

“How’s your hip?” Cody asked, glancing down to where I’d taken at least one set of horns.

I hooked her chin with my finger, lifting her face. “Padded,” I assured her. “That’s why we’ll take the kicks for you.”

“Oh, for me?” And I’d be damned if she didn’t bat those dark lashes of hers at me.

“Shit,” J.D. laughed. “Do that again, Cody, and he’ll get down on a knee for you.”

“Don’t want him on his knees,” she shot back.

“Oh, but I’m good on my knees,” I promised. “I know just how to keep a bull rider entertained.”

“Oh!” J.D. almost howled. “That’s illegal in public, Tanner!”

I just ran my eyes over Cody. “Just making sure the offer’s there. You’re the one with the room, you know.”

Her eyes immediately darted across the bar to where I’d last seen Ty. “Maybe,” she told me.

So I bent to her ear. “And that’s fine too. Just making sure you know that one night with you is not enough.”

Seeing her teeth clamp down on her lower lip? Yep, I was definitely doing just fine. I might not be tonight’s pick, but I was still one of her picks, and that was enough for me.

CHAPTER 23



I HAD a redhead hanging off my shoulder. A brunette was standing too close on my other side, and the pair were glaring at each other like a fight was about to go down. Behind me, another brunette and her blonde friend were dancing in place, just shaking what they had and giggling. In front of me, the pretty girl with the chestnut hair was taking much too long to line up and throw her dart, doing her best to make sure I could see her ass.

“So,” the redhead whispered in my ear, “what are you doing after this?”

“Crashing so I can ride in the morning,” I told her.

Yeah, but the brunette heard. “I give amazing massages,” she offered. “Full body, deep muscle. The kind that will leave you feeling like rubber.”

“Oh, fuck off!” the redhead snapped.

“Hey, he’s not yours,” the brunette shot back.

“Ladies!” I begged. “I thought we were playing darts. In case you two missed it, I’m not a piece of meat.”

“Oh yeah, you are!” And then a pair of arms wrapped around my waist from behind me.

Strong ones. Masculine ones. It took me a second to place the voice, but I turned to see Jorge grinning at me. “You shit,” I told him.

From the other side, Isaac passed me a beer. It was a Bud lime, so I had a good guess where it had come from: Cody.

This was her drink, and I was pretty sure it was the bullfighters' way of reminding me that they knew. Oh, they wouldn't say a damned thing, but they had clearly been informed of this shit I'd gotten myself into.

"You two playing darts?" I asked.

The redhead immediately smiled at Isaac, clearly starting to realize she was getting the brushoff. The brunette, however, just looked Jorge over and rolled her eyes. Well, considering he was married, that worked out, but it didn't impress me a whole lot.

"Pool," Jorge told me. "Leave the ladies to do their thing, Ty."

I turned back to find a waitress. Catching her eye, I made a circle of the women who'd been hovering around me since I'd arrived, then mouthed, "One more."

When the waitress nodded, I leaned in to the brunette. "I got drinks on the way. Excuse me for a sec?"

"Sure, hun," she almost purred back.

With that handled, I let Isaac and Jorge haul me away. Thankfully, they found the quietest corner possible and actually started a game. Having no real interest in playing, I set my beer on the table in the corner and claimed the stool beside it. Isaac said something to Jorge, then came over to take the one across from me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Shoving my face into my hands, I rubbed at both eyes. "No fucking idea," I admitted.

"The girl you want is over at the bar," he added.

"With her boyfriend," I reminded him. "Oh, and her mentor. Yeah, that works out easily."

"And her friend should be with her," he said.

I scoffed at that, then picked up my beer again. If only it was that easy. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to just be Cody's friend. Not in public, not in private, not for real or for

make-believe. This? Having an entire herd of women trying to claw each other's eyes out to get my attention? Yeah, that was what I knew how to manage.

And it made me a piece of shit.

"You know," I said, "I had a damned good night. I'm sitting in first place right now. I hit ninety on a mediocre bull. I should be on top of the world, and instead I'm in the corner with the bullfighters."

"Because we suck, right?" Isaac taunted.

I waved him down. "I was thinking I did. Shit, I'm glad you two came over when you did. Those girls..." I looked up in time to see Austin Chambers step in beside that lusty brunette. All I could do was sigh.

"Missing the single life already?" Isaac asked.

"No," I assured him, lifting my hand to get the attention of a waitress. "Just trying to figure shit out."

This time, it was a man who came over to check on our drinks. He was young and looked both intimidated and awestruck. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Three shots of whiskey," I told him.

"Coming up," he promised.

"Jorge?" I asked. "Whiskey?"

"Sure!" the guy replied.

So I lifted a brow at Isaac, who simply shook his head. "Driving," he told me.

Yeah, well, I was too, but I also knew how to call a cab, Uber, Lyft, or whatever else. So, when the guy came back with the shots, I added on a real beer, not Cody's fruity thing, and told him to keep the shots coming. I also made it clear that these two men were on my tab, no matter what they wanted.

That convinced Isaac to order a soda. Jorge just went with a Corona. The whiskey? Yeah, all three of them ended up going into me, one after the other. I tried to give Jorge his, but he promised a beer was better. Isaac told me I looked like I'd

earned it, and that was enough of an excuse for me to latch on to.

But three shots made it a little easier to talk about this shit. “You know what sucks?” I asked Isaac. “Tanner’s a good man.”

“And that sucks?” he asked.

I nodded, feeling like the alcohol was warming my brain up. “Yep. If he was a dick, I could hate him. If he was mean to her, I could break him. Instead? He’s just a good man. And a damned good bullfighter.”

“Yeah, he is,” Isaac agreed. “We got lucky when he joined the team.”

“And better,” I pointed out. “The three of you work.”

“So do you three,” he countered, lifting a brow to make sure I got his meaning. “Ty, we all talk.”

“I know,” I promised.

“About all of it,” he told me. “I just wanna know one thing. Why’d you back off?”

“Huh?” Because I sure as shit hadn’t backed off.

“To let Tanner date her,” he clarified.

Ah, yeah. I supposed that could be considered backing off. It felt more like being pushed out, but that was more a me problem than anything else. Still, there was something about a little too much whiskey, mixing it with beer - which I knew was a bad idea - and a willing ear that seemed to be the exact recipe I needed.

But first, I looked around, making sure no one was paying too much attention to me. That proved Austin had clearly snagged himself a night with the massage girl. Jake had moved in to chat up the dancing brunette and her blonde friend. Dart girl was still playing darts, doing her best to ignore Kaleb.

And over at the bar, Cody was pinned between J.D. and Tanner. She had her head thrown back, laughing about something. Her arm was around Tanner’s waist, and while J.D.

wasn't touching her, his claim was there. A man would have to be a fool not to see it. Granted, most guys would assume Tanner had brass balls for getting with Cody and risking his wrath. No one would ever guess J.D. Adkins would prefer to be in the middle of those two.

"He's the kind of guy that girls like her settle down with," I told Isaac. "He's good. He'll take damned good care of her. Shit, he makes her feel like she's on top of the world, like some kind of goddamned princess. Me?" I shook my head. "I know all the fucking pickup lines. I know how to get them naked. Know what the shittiest part about all that is?"

"What?" Isaac asked right on cue.

I scoffed. "J.D. called me on it, man. That's why I got in Tanner's face back in Tulsa. I was gonna claim her. I was gonna make it clear I could get her first, have my way with her, and show off the cool new toy in the PB-fuckin'-R."

"Ty..." Isaac groaned.

"I know, pretty shitty, right?" I asked. "I didn't fuckin' love her, but damned if I didn't want that girl to fall for me. I wanted her to turn those baby blues on me when she won her awards. I wanted her to tell everyone she was my girlfriend. Fuck, Isaac. I wanted to make it all about me, but there's one big fucking problem with all that."

"Yeah?"

"Me," I admitted, pausing as the waiter came back with another round of whiskey. "Thanks, man," I told him.

"No problem, sir. Can I get the rest of you something else?"

Isaac waved him off. "I think Ty's just about done, too. When those hit him, I'll be dragging his ass outta here."

"Shit," I grumbled. "I'm not even drunk yet. Just buzzin' a little."

"Mhm," Isaac agreed. "And three more shots will do you in. Trust me, you don't wanna ride with a hangover."

“I’ll bring some water,” the waiter offered before disappearing again.

“That,” I said, pointing after him. “See, that’s how a guy acts in a room full of dumbass bull riders. He sucks up, right? He’s polite and doesn’t start shit. Tanner?” Thrusting out my lower lip, I shook my head. “Fucker got up in my face. He’s not scared of shit when it comes to her. Gotta respect that.”

“And J.D.?” Isaac asked me.

I laughed. “He’s met his fucking match, man.”

“What do you mean?” Isaac pressed.

“J.D. don’t care about no one,” I told him. “Cody cares about everyone. J.D. is ready to throw down. Cody’s ready to ignore it all and push through. And look at ‘em.” I pointed. “Seriously, look.”

Isaac turned to follow where I was pointing. Cody was cheering as J.D. sucked back a glass of something that wasn’t the right color to be beer. Tanner was just shaking his head at the pair of them, but clearly included so fucking easily.

“See that?” I asked. “She’s his fucking heel.”

“His what?” Jorge asked, clearly listening in.

“His heel,” I said, pointing down at my boot to make sure they were following me. “The one place he can be hurt.”

“Achilles’ heel,” Jorge realized. “Gotcha.”

“But she needs J.D.,” I explained to them. “Cody’s real nice. Like, the kind of nice that gets hurt, and some of these guys wanna hurt her.”

“Who?” Isaac immediately asked, latching on to that.

“Austin,” I told him, “Eli, Derek, and Casey. They’ve all been talking shit, according to Emilio. Like, real bad shit. Austin says she needs to get raped. Eli greased her rope, we think. I mean, that was back in Tulsa, but who else wears red and yellow? Or, he could’ve been stalling her for one of the others. Derek and Casey are just fucking flunkies who wanna

be cool, but they ain't hid that they don't like a woman riding."

"And they hang with Austin," Jorge added. "Some of the younger boys are saying the same thing."

"Yeah, which is why Cody needs J.D.," I repeated. "Know what she don't need?"

"What's that?" Austin asked.

I pointed right at my chest. "This guy. When she said she'd studied my rides, I thought I was hot shit. But you've seen her. Fuck, she rides better than me."

"Different," Isaac assured me.

"Better," I corrected. "And fucking good for her, too. She's put in the work. Hell, that girl's been chasing this longer than most of us knew it was a thing. She grew up doing it. Me? I climbed on a bull at fifteen. Most of the guys will say about the same. By then, Cody had a decade of experience on 'em - and was still being told she wasn't good enough."

"But you know things are different at this level," Isaac reminded me.

I nodded. "Yeah. Thing is, she's still got it. She's got them. Shit, she has you two on her side, and that'll save her ass, right?"

"We'll sure try," he promised me.

So I nodded. "But I don't even know how to be her fucking friend, let alone this."

"You're doing fine, Ty," Isaac said gently.

I huffed at that. "Know what the saddest thing is? All my fucking life. Ever since I was a little boy, you know? Everyone always told me I could take what I want. Just take, take, take, take. Thing is, J.D.'s right. She's not a thing, and she can't be taken. She can't be claimed or owned." I reached for my beer. "And that's all I know how to do. I got all the fuckin' pickup lines. I can undo any bra a woman is wearing. I know how to make her cum five times before I'm done." I chuckled, aware

that was a serious exaggeration. “But I don’t know how to do this.”

“Just like you are,” he promised.

“Sitting alone, drinking whiskey with bullfighters, and keeping you from making a friend?” I asked. “Shit. C’mon, Isaac. You’re still single. You know you’d rather be out talking to the ladies.”

He shrugged. “Cept that I’m driving, which means Jorge gets to slam balls around over there, have a few too many, and drink himself to sleep, so I’d be doing this regardless.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said softly. “Nope, if things were different, I would’ve been in the middle of those girls Jake’s prolly taking home tonight.”

“Is that what you want?” Isaac asked.

My eyes jumped over to Cody again. “No,” I breathed. “No, but I also don’t wanna have to stay across the fucking room from her either.”

“Then go talk to her,” he said.

“And fuck it up?” I blew out a breath. “Nah. I think I’d rather sit right here. It’s safer for me to be...” And I pointed down at the chair. “Right here.”

CHAPTER 24



I WAS LEANED against the bar, listening to J.D. talk about how he'd made that damned bull buck so good, and soaking up every hint he probably didn't realize he was handing out. Yes, he was bragging to anyone who'd listen, but at the same time, he was also giving us all the information we needed. While half these guys might not care about that, I sure did.

Then Tanner clasped my arm. I turned back to see what he wanted, and he tipped his head towards the flow of traffic just behind us. Confused, I turned to see Ty staggering his way through bodies, clearly heading for the door.

"I think he's drunk," he told me. "Pretty sure he also drove."

"Shit," I breathed.

"And you're the one who can talk him down," he said.

I grasped Tanner's arm for a second, and then hurried after Ty. A few of the cowboys in here were big enough that I had to weave around them. Thankfully, I caught Ty just before he reached the doors.

"Ty!" I called out.

He stopped and turned at the same time, a silly smile taking over his mouth. "Cody!"

"Hey," I said when I got closer, "are you drunk?"

"Got a damned good buzz," he assured me, but it sounded like a bit more than that. Ok, a lot more.

“And six shots of whiskey in him,” Isaac said from right behind me.

So I thrust out my hand. “Can I see your keys for a sec, Ty? Please?”

“Shit,” he grumbled, shoving his hand into his pocket obediently. “Did you have to do the puppy dog eyes?”

Ok, I hadn’t realized I was doing puppy dog eyes, but when he slapped his keys into my palm, I didn’t really care. In all honesty, there was something a little ironic about this moment. It was almost the complete opposite of Tulsa, when Ty had convinced me to go home with him because I’d had a few too many. Well, minus the boob-grabbing by Austin and J.D. breaking bottles.

“I need you to stay right there,” I told him.

“And I’ll make sure of it,” Isaac promised.

Clutching Ty’s keys in my hand, I wove my way back to the bar. There, Tanner had moved next to J.D., and the pair were talking with their heads bent together. The problem was the cluster of other bull riders packed around them, because I knew anything I said would definitely be overheard.

“Hey,” I breathed when I was close enough. “Ty’s had a few. I was thinking I should drive him back.”

“You should,” Tanner told me. “Have your key?”

“I do,” I assured him. “You coming over?”

He tilted his head at J.D. “I’ll make him give me a ride. Also means I can drag his ass out of here before he’s sloshed.”

“Gonna babysit me now?” J.D. asked.

“Yep,” Tanner assured him.

So J.D. pulled out his own keys and handed them to Tanner. “Good, because I was gonna make Cody drive. Now you can. Don’t worry, girl. I’ll get your piece of ass to ya soon enough.”

Smooth. Easy. Seamless. These two said that like it was no big deal. I also noticed how close they were standing and how

easily they hung out. Most people would assume they were merely friends. Right now, they were, but I also knew they both needed a little time together to figure out if it could be more.

“Sorry,” I told Tanner as I backed away.

“Hey!” he called after me. “That sweet thing is part of your charm, Cody. Not askin’ ya to change.” Then he winked.

That made me feel a lot better, and combined with his words from earlier, I was almost guilt-free. “Then have fun with my mentor,” I called back as I turned to make sure Ty didn’t do anything too stupid.

Thankfully, he was still standing where I’d left him, and as I made my way closer, the sweetest smile touched his lips. Ty turned to Isaac and said something, then held out an arm to me like an invitation to tuck myself in at his side. I did, wrapping my arm around his waist, not surprised at all when he veered off course as we headed towards the door.

“I think you’re a little more than tipsy,” I teased.

He scoffed at that. “Maybe.”

Then we were outside. I spotted the Red Bull RV easily, but Ty’s truck? Yeah, that was a little harder. The entire parking lot was crammed with full-size pickups in all makes, models, and colors. Thankfully, Ty remembered where he parked. Pointing first, he twisted to head that way, and the best I could do was try to keep him from staggering as we turned.

“I had some whiskey,” he told me. “Know why?”

“Because you came in first so were celebrating?” I asked.

He flashed me a drunken grin. “Yup. Shit bull, but I rode the fuck out of him. I did that, Cody! J.D. said I could, then I did, and yeah. It worked.” He chuckled. “Means I can keep up with the best bull rider in the PBR.”

I giggled at him. “Uh huh. So you know, J.D.’s still a few points ahead of you in the world rankings.”

But just as we reached his truck, Ty leaned in towards my neck. “I meant you.”

To hide my embarrassment, I focused on his keys and getting his truck unlocked. Two presses of the button on the key fob made the door click as it unlocked, then I pulled the passenger side open. But instead of getting in it, Ty flopped back against the back door, smiling at me as if his lips were no longer under his control.

“It’s true, ya know,” he said. “You fucking spurred the shit out of that bull, eh? Like, just went for it.”

“And you outscored me,” I reminded him. “You also need to get in the truck, Ty. How else am I gonna get you back to the hotel?”

He reached out and caught the side of my neck. “Mm, a hotel.”

For a second, I thought he was going to try to kiss me, so I quickly pointed inside the truck. “Get in, Ty.”

“Right,” he mumbled, that smile vanishing.

Because there were people out here. I had no clue how many could see us from inside the bar. This was not private, and the last thing I needed were rumors that I was fucking around - or cheating on Tanner. I could play off Ty’s flirting as him being drunk. I could explain away Tanner being ok with this as Ty being my friend. But if he kissed me and I didn’t push him off? Yeah, that would make a lot of problems.

Thankfully, Ty heaved himself into the passenger seat. Once he was all the way in, I closed the door behind him, then jogged around the front of the truck for the driver’s door. Every so often, the sounds from the bar got a little louder, proving the door had opened again, and then it dimmed, allowing the rush of traffic to take over.

That was from the highway that would take us back to the hotel. I’d never been here before, but I was pretty sure I could figure out my way home. So, once I was behind the wheel, I let the glow plugs warm up as I buckled myself in and checked on Ty. He’d already secured his seatbelt and was now jacking with his seat. When the back suddenly dropped all the way down, I squeaked in surprise.

Ty just chuckled. “Oopsie,” he said, heaving himself up so he could get the position how he wanted it.

I twisted the key. “Ty, are you drunk?”

“Fucking smashed,” he admitted. “Fuck, beer before liquor. Bad call. Don’t do it, Cody. Not ever.”

“You gonna puke?” I asked once I had the truck running.

He shook his head, so I backed out of the parking space and got us moving. On the short drive back, he just closed his eyes, humming every so often like he might not feel as good as he’d hoped. I was pretty sure his alcohol hadn’t all caught up with him yet, and I was starting to wonder if I’d really be able to get him up to our room without help.

Because Ty was not a little guy. Most bull riders were. It helped us stay on. Ty? Nope, he was tall, muscular, sexy, and amazing. None of that would make it easy for me to carry him, but I wasn’t used to quitting. At least not on things that mattered. However, when we made it to the Marriott, he got himself out of the truck and met me at the back, only hanging onto the edge of the bed a little for stability.

“C’mere, babe,” I said, wrapping my arm around his waist again. “Oh, Ty, you are gonna feel so bad in the morning.”

“Mm, but I stayed out of your way,” he told me. “You and them? Yeah, works for you.”

“And my friend can hang out too, you know,” I told him, aware he probably wouldn’t remember this talk tomorrow.

He just shook his head. “Nope. Nunh-unh. Guys like me? We want one thing.” He held up a single finger before us both. “One.”

“Uh huh,” I said, thankful the main doors to this place were easy to get open while steering a big drunk man into the lobby. “What’s that?”

“Sex.” He paused, looking around as if he’d just figured out where we were. “Oh, this is the hotel!”

“Yeah,” I said, aiming him towards the elevators. “Gotta keep moving, big boy.”

“Ok,” he agreed, helping me out a little more. Thankfully, that was all he said until we were on the elevator and heading up. Then, it was as if he remembered what he’d been trying to tell me. “Sex,” he said again, the word coming out of the blue.

“All you want is sex?” I asked as the doors opened on the second floor.

He nodded, staggering out with me. “Yup. We take, take, take.” Then he waved his hand out, gesturing to all the rooms around us. “All these guys? Same thing. Take, take, take.”

“Right,” I mumbled, once again hating that our rooms were at the far end of the hall.

Ty just sighed and leaned on me a little more. “Cody?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I’m fucking trashed, eh?”

“Yeah, you are,” I agreed. “It’s ok. I got ya, and you deserve it.”

“But I don’t deserve you,” he mumbled as I turned for the door to his room.

“Key?” I asked, since mine was for the other door.

His brow furrowed. “Back pocket?”

Yep, I wasn’t sure I could move him further down to reach my own door, so started patting his ass, hoping to feel the lump of it. The left cheek was empty. The right had a wallet in it, so I reached in to check that, and found his key card between it and his ass. Pulling that out, I managed to get the door open and then guided him in.

The door swung shut behind us on its own. As we moved deeper inside, I tossed all his keys onto the long dresser, pulled off his hat and put it beside them, then aimed him for the bed. Ty didn’t even try to make it graceful. Once we were close enough, he simply flopped face first onto the mattress, and then giggled like he was a little girl.

It was enough to make me laugh at him and shake my head. “Oh, Ty…” I mumbled, nudging his hip. “You have to

roll over or you're gonna slide off the side."

"Ok," he agreed.

But while he focused on that, I headed back to make sure the door was secure. Next, I headed for the bathroom to get him a glass of water. With that, I came back. Setting it beside him, I made for his bag, digging inside so I could find where he kept the Advil I knew he had. Instead, I found condoms. Lots of condoms.

"Ty?" I asked. "Where's the Advil?"

"Gear bag," he said.

Which meant the truck. So, pulling my phone out of my pocket, I sent a text off to J.D. asking if he'd grab our gear out of Ty's truck and lock the thing - since I was pretty sure I hadn't done that. He sent me back a thumb's up. I thought that was all, but another line popped up just before I put my phone down.

J.D.:

You cool with me having company on my side?

I huffed out a laugh, then quickly sent back my response.

Cody:

Yep. Ty's trashed. I'm gonna make him go to sleep and have a shower by myself. You deserve a little celebration. I think we need to compare notes.

J.D.:

<3 That's my rookie!

I couldn't help but smile at the heart emoji he'd sent, but then I dimmed my phone and went back for Ty. Now lying on his back, the man was pushing out breaths like he might not be feeling so good. He also had one arm over his eyes like he was trying to block out the light.

“How you doing, cowboy?” I asked as I pulled off one of his boots.

“Fuck,” he grumbled.

So I moved to the other. “I’m gonna move a trash can over here beside you, just in case you puke, ok?”

“Not puking,” he told me.

Yeah, I didn’t believe him. I claimed the one by the table and moved it in front of the nightstand, then crawled up on the mattress and started working on Ty’s belt. A little smile touched his lips, and he didn’t try to stop me. When I had that off, I started tugging at his shirt, trying to get it out of his pants.

“I think I need to be on bottom,” he said.

“No, Ty,” I said, tugging at his arm so he’d sit up. “No condoms, remember?”

“In my bag,” he told me.

“I don’t know how to put them on, and you’re drunk.”

“So?” he asked, helping me to get his shirt off. “Fucking dick’s hard.”

“Remember when I was drunk?” I asked.

“But you’re a girl,” he grumbled.

“And you are too drunk,” I told him even as I began working to get his pants open. “Baby, tonight I get to take care of you, ok?”

“When did I become ‘baby’?” he asked.

“When you got too drunk to walk on your own,” I assured him. “Now help me out a little?”

He lifted his ass and pushed at his pants - but not his underwear. “Sex,” he repeated for the third time tonight. “Guys like me? Yeah, that’s what we think matters, but maybe it don’t. Maybe, Cody, sex is just how we think we’re not getting ignored, you know? Because we’re not good enough to have a girl care about making sure we’re ok. No, we’re the

real men. We're the ones who are supposed to take care of her." He murmured like he could barely hold on to his thought. "But I figured something out, eh."

I pulled back the blankets, trying to make it easy to get him under them. "What's that?"

He flopped his head over to the side to look at me. "We're the ones who need it. To be taken care of, I mean. We try to be all tough, but guys like me are just scared there won't be no one to care enough. I don't wanna be alone. I don't wanna be that guy, the one who takes. I'm just scared that if I don't, there won't be nothing left for me. Won't be no one who wants to see me when I'm not on top of the world."

"Right now," I told him, "you're a long way from the top. Get under the blankets, Ty."

"You leaving?" he asked.

"No, baby," I promised. "You're not the only one who gets to take care of people. I'm pretty good at it too."

"Yeah," he breathed, "you really are."

CHAPTER 25



TANNER SMILED after Cody when she left. The look was so real that I knew he had it bad for her. The question in my mind was if I had a chance with this guy now. Had I waited too long, letting those two hook up and figure themselves out? Or was it just that we were in public, where flirting would get either one of us a solid beatdown?

But over the next hour, I realized my fears were unfounded. Tanner laughed with me, drank soda while I tossed back shots and beers, and his eyes kept dropping when he laughed. It was subtle enough to be overlooked by most, but I'd been waiting for any hint that I had a chance.

Then Cody sent me a text to let me know Ty was smashed. She was also encouraging me to play with her boyfriend. Ok, maybe I'd kinda asked, but we were pals like that, and I was all about the sharing. Mostly because Tanner was fucking sexy. He had that good boy look that made my dick get hard, and I wanted to see if he was just horny or interested in more.

So, I got to know him. I asked about his job. I teased him about needing his "fix" of adrenaline on the weekends. Eventually, he turned that back on me and my dumbass riding skills that often left me hurting in the dirt with no score. Still, he said it like it was a compliment, and so many times, his eyes dropped to run across my body. My fucking dick was half hard - and I kinda liked it.

When the riders eventually started leaving with their conquest of the night, I made a production of telling Tanner I'd need him to drive. I also put on a bit of an act, making it

clear that all those empty glasses beside me had just turned into a good excuse. The man's brow furrowed for a second, but he helped my "drunk" ass out to my truck. And yet, once I was safely in the passenger seat, I knew I could stop faking it.

"You good?" Tanner asked as he climbed behind the wheel.

"Probably over the limit to drive," I admitted, "but I spaced it out well enough. Just needed to cover our tracks. How about you?"

He smiled as he started the truck. "Well, I'm pretty sure my girlfriend is getting fucked right about now." Then his eyes jumped over to me. "But good otherwise."

"Naw," I taunted as he left the parking lot for the bar and aimed for our latest home, "that don't give me any idea of how to act. Help a guy out here?"

"Huh?"

I leaned back in my seat and chuckled softly. "All week long, you've been all about Cody. And yeah, she's into ya." I kept my eyes locked on the highway we were merging onto. "But I'm kinda into ya too. Just not sure if that's dead in the water, get me?"

"Not dead," he mumbled.

"Well," I said, pressing my advantage, "I know I can't just grab you in public. Yeah, that would not go down well. Been eye-fuckin' ya a bit, though."

Tanner huffed out a single laugh and dipped his head. Flicking my eyes over, I could see his face was just a bit darker, like he might even be blushing. So, it seemed this guy was a little shy, huh? Crazy, but shy. Why did that seem so damned sexy to me?

"I mean, if you just wanna crash at our place," I went on, "I can keep my hands to myself so you can get more time with Cody."

"So is that it?" he finally asked. "You've been pulling back so I can hook up with Cody?"

“Givin’ my rookie the chance to get what she deserves,” I agreed. “And maybe being a bit of a pussy myself.”

“Then stop that,” he told me. “I was starting to think our moment last weekend was a one-off to get her going or something.”

“Nah,” I grumbled, glancing down at the floorboard. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to take you on a date without us getting busted.”

“I don’t need a fucking date,” Tanner assured me. “Shit. Pretty sure I’ve never been on a date with a guy, and you? Yeah, someone will recognize you. Not worth the risk, J.D.”

“So I gotta be in the closet now?” I asked.

He shook his head slowly like that was a silly question. “You know you do. Just like I do. Least till we quit the PBR. The way I see it, that means more time for getting to know you and talking.” Then he glanced over. “And maybe a little fun behind closed doors when we use Cody as our excuse.”

“Oh, I’m down for that,” I agreed just as he pulled into the hotel’s parking lot.

But damned if this talk hadn’t just made things a little awkward. The good kind, though. The kind that had me running my eyes over the way that man wore his jeans and loving the Converse he had on. That purple jersey looked good on him too. The best part was his strawberry-blond hair. It was just long enough to show the waves at the back of his neck and make his hazel eyes look almost green.

Together, the pair of us got out of the truck, but I jerked my head over at Ty’s. “Hey, I have to grab a few things, and Cody’s pretty sure she didn’t lock it.”

“Sure,” Tanner said, following me over.

And nope, she hadn’t locked it. In the back seat, their gear bags were sitting side by side, since Ty had given her a ride to the bar. I claimed both, passing Cody’s to Tanner, then checked for anything else they might need in the morning. Seeing nothing, I locked up Ty’s truck, then aimed Tanner towards the main door of the hotel.

Something about carrying bags made it feel easier, or maybe a bit less conspicuous. It didn't even matter to me that the lobby was empty, the staff at the front desk were all half asleep and paying us no attention, or that we were the only ones on the elevator. My eyes kept jumping back to Tanner, and I knew what I wanted to do to him. I had also *never* taken a man back to my own room before. No, that was the best way to get caught. But it was exactly what I was doing tonight, and damned if I didn't like that rush of danger.

We didn't bother talking until we were inside my room and the door was closed behind us. Tanner even reached up to secure the panic lock, making sure no one else could come in. I just pointed to the far bed, then aimed my own feet for the adjoining door.

"Toss her bag up there," I told him. "I'm gonna put this in their room. Oh, and get comfy." Then I flashed him a smile before opening the door and slipping across to the other side.

It was dark. There was a towel on the back of the chair by the table. The bed closest to the bathroom had two lumps in it, but neither one was moving. So, doing my best not to wake them, I set Ty's bag in the middle of the table and snuck back out. On my side, Tanner had taken off both his hat and shoes. Now, the man was slowly looking over the little signs of Cody all over the room.

"She normally sleep here?" he asked when I closed the doors between rooms.

I shook my head. "Nah. She's been with Ty so far. They're working out their shit."

"What shit?" he asked.

"He's jealous. She feels guilty." I almost stopped there. "And she's not fucking as much as he wants to."

"Ah," Tanner said, shifting to rest his hip against the dresser.

So I pulled off my hat and set it on the table. Next, I worked off my boots while letting my eyes run across that man again. He was nervous, I could see it. Not scared, but also not

completely comfortable yet. Deciding to give him a little distraction, I pulled off my shirt too, then tossed that on what I was starting to think of as Cody's bed. Immediately, his eyes moved to examine each and every one of my tattoos.

"What are we doing, J.D.?" he asked softly.

"Dunno," I admitted. "What do you think we should be doing?"

A hint of a smile flickered across Tanner's lips, then he took a step towards me, pulling off his own shirt in the process. "Oh, my girl all but told me to take care of you. I'm just trying to figure out if this is nothing more than a fuck."

And now my dick was completely hard. Fuck, I liked his soft swagger.

"Doesn't have to be just a fuck," I assured him.

Which made Tanner pause a single pace away from me. Slowly, he reached up to trace the bull's skull tattooed on my chest. When he licked his lips, I wanted to groan, but didn't because I was trying real damned hard to brace for him to say this meant nothing. I was used to that. An orgasm. A little fun. A secret no one could know about. That was how I'd been with guys in the past, and I wouldn't blame Tanner at all for feeling the same way.

"You barely know me," Tanner finally said.

So I reached out for his waist, guiding him closer. "You barely know Cody, but that sure as shit ain't stoppin' ya."

His hand began to move lower, slowly, almost like he was taunting me. "If you've got a good boy fetish, you're going to be disappointed."

That made me bark out a laugh. "Shit, Tan, you are not a good boy. You just play one on TV. Well, 'least for them idiots that ain't realized you always take the chance. You're always right in there. You..." And I stepped in until the only thing separating us was his hand on my belly. "...Are one crazy motherfucker."

His other hand grabbed the side of my neck, and before I knew it, we were kissing. I wasn't sure if I'd kissed him or he'd kissed me, but that shit didn't matter. The hand on my belly dropped down to cup my shaft, so I bucked into it. My own hands were reaching for his ass, wanting him right up against me.

Our tongues fought for dominance. Tanner's thrust into my mouth. Mine caressed it, daring him to keep up. When I felt his teeth on my lip, I finally let that groan slip out, because this was getting real hot, real fast. I liked it, but there was one thing I needed to know.

"So what is it for you?" I breathed against his lips. "Just a fuck?"

I felt it as he smiled against my mouth. "Nope. The difference is that I know you, J.D. You make it very clear who you are. Me? Everyone thinks I'm the good boy."

"Not me," I promised, letting go of his ass to work his pants open. "I happen to remember you grabbing me by the throat and shoving me against the wall."

"Like that?" he asked.

"I like that you don't break," I told him, yanking at his damned belt so I could pull at the flap and force his zipper down.

He immediately began to work on mine. "No, I don't break. I don't need to stand in the spotlight." He got the buckle open and popped the button like a pro. "I've also had a thing for the top bull rider for a couple years now."

So I pushed, shoving him down onto the bed and landing on top of him. "Yeah? This mean you're gonna let me have my way with you?"

Tanner grabbed my shoulders and rolled us both over so he was lying over me. "If you haven't figured it out by now, I'm a top."

Yep, I felt the blood throbbing in my dick, but all I could do was laugh. "Yeah, me too, babe. Me fuckin' too."

It took a second before my words hit, then he let go and flopped down beside me on his back. “Really?”

“But I’ll bottom for the right man.” Then I pushed myself off the bed, letting my pants hang open in the front and headed for my bag to grab my lube. “Just remember that I’m riding tomorrow.”

Tanner shifted enough to push his pants and underwear off, watching me as I crossed the room. “Condoms too, since I know you have those in there.”

I grabbed the bottle of lube and an entire box before heading back. When he scooted higher on the bed, completely naked, I paused to see exactly what I was working with. Every gorgeous, muscular, sensual inch of him.

“That condom thing?” I said. “Yeah, makes me think you might be the right man.”

“Just means I get the chance to prove it,” he promised.

CHAPTER 26



DAMN, J.D. was a good-looking man. I had a weakness for those lean, ripped types, and his body was making my dick ache in the best way. When he dropped the lube and condoms beside the table, I couldn't take it anymore. He needed to be naked, and now. Like he was reading my mind, the man turned and pushed his pants to his ankles.

A sly smile touched his lips before he moved to hook his thumbs in his underwear. I swore my lungs forgot how to work as I watched this man slowly push down his briefs. Fuck me, but he was hard, and thick, and long. Ropes of veins circled his dick, and it was more than I could take.

Pushing myself up so I was sitting, I slid forward and dropped off the bed to land on my knees. My hands found J.D.'s hips, and I pulled him closer. He didn't fight me at all, but for the first time, this arrogant ass of a man had turned gentle and quiet. Looking up, the lights in the room made it easy to see the hungry look in his eyes as his dick wagged right in my face.

"Thought you were a top?" he breathed.

I pressed my hand against the middle of his belly and slowly let it glide downwards. "Doesn't mean I shouldn't take care of you, does it?"

I heard the air stagger out of J.D.'s lungs like he hadn't expected that. My hand made it to his hip, then the soft skin beside that. When I finally let my fingers wrap around the base of his dick, J.D. was breathing just a little too hard, and I had

definitely taken control. I just wasn't sure how he felt about that.

“Tanner...” he breathed.

So I leaned in, running my tongue up the underside of his dick. “Trying to say I should take it easy on you?”

The corner of his lip curled up. “Naw. I'm just curious about whether you swallow.”

“Yeah,” I assured him before shoving my entire mouth over the head of his dick.

And then I pushed down. J.D.'s hand found the back of my head. The other cupped my jaw, but he didn't pull. Instead, he tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and let me have him. Fuck, but that looked good. I slid back, taking my time about it, and felt his fingers pushing into my hair. When I pressed in again, my bad boy pumped into my mouth like he was testing me out.

Yeah, this was going to be a bit of a power struggle, but I was actually ok with that. I didn't need him to be my plaything. Oddly, I didn't want him to be. No, I liked everything about his attitude, and couldn't wait to see what happened when he turned it on me.

So I slid my hand back with my mouth, stroking him as I sucked him off. He made another of those deep noises, and then he took over. His head dropped, our eyes met, and he thrust between my lips. There was nothing gentle about it, either. He only pushed until he reached the back of my throat, and he was watching me the entire time, our eyes locked.

“You can have my ass,” he said, passion turning his voice into something nearly a growl, “but I'm fucking your face like I wanna.”

Letting go of his dick, I reached up to clasp his wrist instead, all but giving him permission. His lips parted, he pulled in a silent breath when he realized I was giving him my version of consent, and then his fingers fisted in the back of my hair. That was when he took over.

J.D. pumped himself into my mouth, pulling my face down the way he wanted. I could no longer see his face, but I loved the intensity. No, I was not the kind of man who got off on being used, but it seemed he wasn't either. Granted, gentlemen had never done it for me. My weakness was the kind of man who wasn't shy, quiet, or passive. I liked the dangerous ones, the kind who had sharp edges to their personalities - he was all of that and more - because I liked the challenge. I loved the rush. I wanted the conquest.

But the next time he thrust, I pressed my tongue against his dick. Then I curled it around the shaft, taunting him, teasing him, sucking gently to devour him. He might think he was taking my mouth, but damned if I wasn't taking him too. Every time he rocked into the back of my throat, I made sure he didn't want to pull back, and I never touched him with anything but my mouth.

All those tattoos on his body were flexing and shifting before me. His fingers were clenching my head a little tighter. I loved the way his abs tensed and relaxed as he thrust himself between my lips, and I could tell he was loving this too.

So I reached up to fondle his balls. That was when the bad boy of the PBR growled with desire. His thrusts got more insistent, so my fingers squeezed just a bit, keeping him right where I wanted. Sure, maybe J.D. was fucking my face, but I was the one in control here, and I was pretty sure we both knew it.

I also got the feeling my man liked it.

A lot.

Because his dick was getting thicker. I could feel his pulse pounding against my tongue. A glance upwards showed J.D.'s eyes clenched shut as tightly as possible as he allowed himself to get lost in the feel of my mouth. Faster. A little deeper. I dropped my eyes and did everything I could to make him feel so good. He fucked like he couldn't help himself until, with a strangled noise in the back of his throat, he lost control and came.

I swallowed, doing nothing more than taking what he was offering. From the salty taste on the back of my tongue to the way his hands softened against the back of my head, not quite ready to caress, J.D.'s movements spoke volumes. We were testing each other, we both knew it, and while I wasn't sure about him, I liked what I found.

Sliding my lips from his dick, I pushed to my feet and headed straight for the bed. Behind me, J.D. didn't move for a moment. I was pretty sure he'd expected me to want a kiss, or a cuddle, or something sweet, but I was not that kind of man. He wasn't either, so I didn't want to fuck around with lies and gestures to placate him. Especially since we didn't want it.

A little laugh slipped from his lips the moment I flopped back down onto the mattress, but then he followed me. I caught the unevenness of his first step. That was from his bad knee. The second probably wasn't, but J.D. didn't seem to care. He dropped down on the side by the lube and condoms, then let out a heavy sigh of satisfaction.

“So, not a cuddler,” he said, making it a proclamation.

“You or me?” I asked.

He glanced over. “You, because I am.”

Not at all what I'd expected. “I just figured you needed a moment,” I admitted as I shifted closer.

And he rolled into me. We met with our mouths first, and our hands right after. The first kiss was hard. The next was deeper. Then each pass of our mouths grew softer and more meaningful. It was like something had been settled, and now I was finally getting to see the real man no one ever had before - except maybe Cody.

J.D. kissed me like he was drowning. His hands clung to me almost desperately. The feel of this man wanting *me*, not just a guy to fuck, was too obvious to ignore, and it pierced right through all the emotional walls I'd ever put up. In that moment, I realized he wasn't anything I'd expected.

He was simply everything he'd ever let me see. All of it, at the same time.

I liked that so much. He was vulnerable, soft, hard, dangerous, and loyal. What made J.D. so different was that he didn't play the games the rest of us felt we had to. He didn't say the right things, act the proper ways, or go the places he was expected to. Instead, he threw who he was in our faces, almost like he was begging someone - anyone - to accept the person he'd become.

That was what I'd been missing about him. It was why he worked so well with Cody. It was the one thing I'd never been able to do, and I was drawn to his raw honesty like a fucking moth to a flame. I wanted to taste his need. I longed to feel his trust. As my tongue delved between his teeth, exploring every last inch of his mouth, I also couldn't deny that I had to feel him, see him, and my achingly hard dick did not want to wait any longer.

Shifting over his body, I kept kissing. His hands kept exploring, teasing my body with each pass across my skin. He flicked my left nipple, bit my lip, then grabbed my hips and settled me right between his legs. Dick to dick, I thrust, grinding my length against his, but the partly dried spit made it rub all wrong.

“Shit,” I breathed, lifting my hips.

At the same time, he was reaching for the table beside him, pulling his mouth away to look at the supplies he'd put out. When his hand landed on the lube, I made a noise to stop him.

“Condom first,” I decided.

That earned me a little smile. “Oh, so you're gonna go for missionary? Figured you'd flip me over, bad boy.”

I grabbed the condom the moment he offered it, then leaned back onto my knees to worry about getting the thing on. While my hands focused on that, I answered his question.

“I wanna see what it looks like when the man I've been crushing on for two years gets off.”

He teased his eye-tooth with the tip of his tongue, taunting me. “A crush, huh?”

“Fuck off.” I got the condom rolled down, so gestured for him to pass me the lube.

He handed it over, but those dark eyes were still watching me - and not my dick. “You’re a lot like her, you know.”

I poured a handful of the gel into my palm, then wiped it all around my dick. “Cody?”

“Mhm.”

Which made me pause. “Is that what you wanted? A shy and gentle lover in your bed?”

“Shit,” he drawled, reaching over to caress my thigh. “I have a feeling there’s a real big difference between shy and her being a rookie. Figure both of ya are nice, you’re both real pretty to look at, and you both get me crazy hard. You’re also both tougher than nails, and I think that’s fuckin’ hot.”

I poured a little more lube into my hand. “What is it you want from this, J.D.?”

“You.” His answer hung between us for a moment. “Oh, if all you want is a fuck, I’m down for that too. But what I want?” His eyes slid down my body. “A fuckin’ chance.”

I closed the bottle and tossed the lube to the side, then leaned over him, holding myself off his body with my left hand. When we were close enough, I kissed him, refusing to stop until his hands were on my back again and he’d stopped worrying about what came next.

Which was when I pulled back just enough to whisper, “I’ve never done more than one night with a guy.”

He snuck in another kiss. “Wanna try?”

“Fuck yeah,” I breathed before reaching down and coating his ass with the lube in my other hand.

It was warm now, at least. He still sucked in a breath and clenched, but it let me play with him. As his hips shifted, his dick pressed against mine. Condom to skin, the lube was enough to let me slide instead of grind. Then he joined in, shifting to press his shaft to mine, which was when I pressed a finger against the pucker of his ass.

This close, I couldn't miss how his eyes closed. I loved how his biceps flexed, almost like he was straining to hold on to something, even though the caresses against my back didn't get any harder. No, J.D. was being vulnerable right now, and damned if it wasn't one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen.

He didn't fight me. As I fingered his ass, he pushed, flexed, and rocked with it. When I added a second finger, his body let me right in, and I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to feel him, to hear him groan with pleasure. Fuck, if I was honest, I needed to take care of him, and right now that meant making him feel real good.

A shift of my hips and my dick slid down. I had to grab the thing to angle it right, but when I pushed in, he pushed back like he was ready to take what he wanted. J.D., it seemed, could be one hell of a power bottom, but I was gonna be real careful with him. Gentle even, because this was not gonna be about conquest.

His body was so hot, his ass so tight, but the look on his face was the best. Seeing his lips part and his pupils flare was beautiful. Feeling his leg shift to hook against the back of mine, pulling me closer, was too. As I eased myself all the way in, I paused to bend and kiss him one more time. Then again. I was not about to move until we both relaxed and stopped overthinking this.

"Relax," I said softly. "I'm not gonna hurt you, because I know you'd make me pay."

His eyes slipped closed. "Slowly," he said. It wasn't begging, or even a request, but I understood.

So I moved. His hips lifted, rocking with me. When I pushed back in, he was right there, but things had changed again. The fight was gone. The battle had been postponed. Whatever power struggle I'd started by blowing him, J.D. had just finished by gifting me with his body, and I knew I was the one who'd "lost" this round. If this could honestly be considered losing.

Because seeing him like this? Yeah, once would not be enough. Feeling him clench around me? I stopped holding back, bracing for him to kick me out when we were done, never talk to me again, or whatever other subconscious fears were pinging around in my head. I just moved, rocking into his body slowly as I explored.

With each press, my eyes were locked on his face, looking for some sign of what he liked. With every pass of my dick in his ass, I sought out the best spot, wanting to hear this man at least suck in a breath. The hard muscles of his chest pressed against mine as our bodies slid together, and his hands pulled, setting the tempo, but he was giving me so little.

Then I found it. As my dick slid a little deeper, J.D.'s eyes jumped open and his hands clenched against my back. His entire body reacted, and I knew that was it, so I did it again, and the quiet lover beneath me became everything I'd expected.

He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled my mouth to his. When I pumped into him again, hitting that same spot, his hand found my ass to pull a little harder. I could feel his dick against my belly, so reached between us to grab it, sliding my lube-slicked hand over him each time my dick was buried in his ass.

He lifted his hips off the bed and rocked with me. Harder, faster. Yeah, I'd guessed right when I'd thought he could be a power bottom, and it was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. So I fucked. I wanted to let go completely, to prove that I was man enough to keep up with him, but one thing kept running through my mind: he had to ride tomorrow.

He was setting the pace, so I took. Our tongues tangled. Our bodies writhed. We didn't bother talking, because that meant we wouldn't be kissing. The touches, the groans and moans falling from both of us? They were enough, and each one spoke volumes.

He felt so fucking good and looked even better. Seeing this wild man like this? It was more than I'd ever hoped for. Not even my daydreams had come close. No, J.D. was nothing like

I'd imagined, and if I wasn't careful, I was going to be in far too deep with him to ever pull myself out.

And I was ok with that.

So I let go. I let him have his way with me, pushing back onto my dick, riding me from the bottom as I desperately tried to keep up. It no longer mattered who was the bigger man, the crazier one, or anything else. I just wanted to kiss him again, feel him enjoying me, and know this was real.

In the same bed where I'd had my way with Cody, J.D. had his way with me, and it felt so damned good. I was struggling not to finish too fast. I was trying so hard to keep up, but he was a lover unlike any I'd experienced before. This man was real, and while he gave me the option to take it or leave it, he was begging me to take - to take all I wanted, because he was no longer holding back.

So I stroked him harder. I fucked him faster. I was right there, ready to blow my load, but I wanted him to come first, or at least with me.

"Please," I begged, bucking into him again and again.

His answer was to kiss me one more time, but the next rock of his hips faltered. In my hand, I could feel him starting to swell, and it was all I could do to breathe through the pleasure wracking my body. Not yet. I couldn't come yet, but he was so tight and hot around me. So feral as he bucked into me.

Then he sucked in a breath. His ass clenched even tighter. I jerked my eyes open, unaware of when I'd closed them, and was just in time to feel him throb in my hand as his orgasm hit. J.D.'s back arched off the bed. I rocked into him again, feeling myself lose control, but my eyes were locked on his face as my orgasm hit.

And he cried out. The growl of pleasure was deep and honest. The look of passion on his face was simply beautiful, but the feeling of bliss that consumed me made it all even better. This one moment would be forever seared in my mind

as I tried to ride him through it and failed, collapsing on his chest as my body decided it could take no more.

His arms immediately held me there, hugging me close. I pressed my cheek against his chest, reaching up to tangle my fingers in his hair as I panted for breath. I needed to move. I shouldn't be lying on him, and my position wasn't exactly comfortable, but the feel of him against me, along the entire length of my body, was too good. Too real. Too much like a dream.

"That," J.D. huffed, his panting almost as heavy as mine. "Yeah, all that."

I chuckled and managed to extract myself from his ass, but leaving the bed was going to take a second longer. "Just tell me I didn't hurt you?" I asked.

"Naw," he assured me.

I nodded slowly, then forced myself to roll off the side so I could take this condom to the bathroom. My knees felt a bit like rubber, but in the best way. Damn, he'd worked me. And to think, I was supposed to have been the top! Maybe I'd been the one doing the penetrating, but that? It made me reconsider a few things. So I got rid of the condom, wiped my junk up a bit so I was at least sorta clean, and then made my way back.

"Hey," I said, pausing at the foot of the bed. "You fuck like that when you're on top?"

"Nah, I'm nicer on top," he said, offering me a lazy smile that was a lot closer to a devious smirk.

Yeah, that looked good on him. It was also about what I'd expected him to say. "Might make me think about bottoming," I said, but the words came out softer than I'd wanted.

J.D. just yanked the blankets back on my side of the bed in a clear invitation to get closer. "Wanna fuck around and find out?" he asked just as I got one knee on the bed.

A laugh burst from my mouth. "That is not how that phrase is supposed to be used."

He just shrugged, waiting only until I was all the way in bed before rolling up against me and resting his head on my chest.

“I ain’t gonna hurt ya, Tanner.”

I adjusted my pillow, then let myself wrap my arm around his back. J.D. relaxed into me, and for just a moment, I watched him. This shit was supposed to make him a pussy. It should’ve weakened him somehow, but it didn’t. It felt like trust, and it was sweeter than I’d imagined.

Something began to let go. Stress? Tension? Expectations? I wasn’t even sure, but I felt myself soften as I curled around him, giving myself permission to simply enjoy the feel of this man the same way I had with Cody. To be here, in the moment, not waiting for the time to get up and leave.

“There ya are,” J.D. said.

I chuckled, realizing I’d just been busted. “Yeah, I’m used to leaving when done.”

“But we’re not doing that,” he told me.

I huffed out something like another laugh. “You know, you’re a lot like her.”

That made him look up, our eyes meeting. “Cody?”

I nodded. “She’s soft on the outside and hard in the middle. You’re hard on the outside and soft in the middle.”

“Yeah...” he mumbled. “And real tired of being alone, Tanner. Real fuckin’ tired.”

“Me too,” I promised as I bent to kiss his head. “I’m just not good at this part.”

“Me neither,” he said. “So I figure we’re gonna figure it out together. Then we’re gonna show our girl that it can work, get me? Means we gotta be man enough to take the risk first.”

I let out a sigh I hadn’t realized had been building, because I honestly liked how he thought. “I can do that. I’m just gonna be a fucking idiot.”

“But a damn sexy one,” he assured me. “I prefer it when people call it crazy, though. And Tanner? I really like your kind of crazy.”

CHAPTER 27



I WOKE UP WITH A GROAN. A soft one, because my head was pounding too hard to make it any louder. My mouth was dry. My guts were complaining, but thankfully not rolling. My entire body felt like I'd been hit by a pissed-off bull, yet when I cracked my eyes open, the first thing I saw was an angel.

Cody was curled up a few inches from me, and still asleep. Her arms were against her chest, her golden lashes lay against her cheek, and her hair was spilled out behind her. She looked beautiful. Seeing her was all it took to remind me of what exactly had happened - or not, as the case might be - last night. I'd been a damned idiot, and she'd still taken care of me.

Fuck if that didn't feel pretty good.

So I crawled out of bed and decided I'd repay the favor somehow. A hot shower was a good start. It also made my head feel better. So did a handful of pills to push away the pounding. After that came a gallon of water to rehydrate myself. In reality, it was two glasses of water and four pills, but my hangover made it feel like a lot more work.

Then I ordered room service for Cody, along with a coffee for myself. When everything was delivered, I finally woke her up. While she ate, she kept alternating between watching videos of the bulls and asking if I was ok. The first time was to check my health. I was pretty sure the second was her way of trying to figure out if I was mad at her for not fucking me. I wasn't.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized this was better. Sex? It was easy. Yeah, it was good, and it was a pretty blatant way for a girl to let me know she was into me, but taking care of my drunk ass? That actually *meant* something. For the first time, I was starting to see what J.D. had been trying to beat into my brain. This feeling in my chest? It wasn't about getting off. It was about something bigger, and the only word I had for that was a relationship. A girlfriend, not just a fuck.

But when she snuck over to the other room to get her clothes, she came back struggling not to laugh. "I don't wanna wake them," she tittered before tossing her bag down on the spare bed.

"They're both over there?" I asked, because I was pretty sure she meant J.D. and Tanner.

Cody just nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Spooning, and I'm pretty sure they're naked."

Yep, I had to see this. So, trying to be quiet, I cracked open the dividing door and poked my head in. Sure enough, Tanner was wrapped up against J.D.'s back. The blankets were a mess, pushed down a bit, and neither man had on a shirt. Maybe underwear, but I doubted it from the explosion of clothes on the floor.

A glance showed both of their phones plugged in, which meant someone had at least thought ahead enough to get ready for this morning. So, if J.D.'s damned alarm hadn't gone off yet, then I was gonna let them sleep as long as they needed, because this was just one more good thing for today.

The guys had finally hooked up. Cody had taken care of me when I'd needed it most. I wasn't being pushed out of this. In other words, today was going to be a good day, pounding head or not.

She was putting the last of her things into her gear bag when the alarm went off in J.D.'s room. I heard both men talking, but couldn't make out the words, so I rapped on the door. When J.D. called for me to enter, I shoved my head in

the way I had earlier, not surprised to see only one man. Tanner, it seemed, was in the bathroom.

“Hey,” I told J.D., “I’m gonna take Cody to the arena. You good with that?”

He grumbled under his breath as he kicked at the clothes on the floor. “Yup. Get her bull drawn. Just know that people saw Tanner drive me home from the bar last night.”

“So let him drive your hungover ass to the arena,” I suggested. “Pretty sure I’m letting Cody drive.”

“Good plan,” he agreed.

I almost left then, but this whole new relationship thing was still bouncing in my mind. The three of us worked well together, taking care of our girl. But didn’t this mean I should look out for them a bit too?

Deciding I had nothing to lose, I asked, “You two gonna be good to ride and run today?”

J.D.’s head jumped up, but his expression was that dangerous one. Calm. Stony. Only his eyes showed anything before he nodded.

“I’m good. He’s got nothing to bitch about.”

So I nodded back. “Cool. Lemme know if I need to punch you for a cover.” Then I leaned back, only to hear J.D. laugh a moment later as the offer sank in.

But I meant it. We all knew what would happen if rumors of those guys being gay started to circulate. It didn’t even matter that they weren’t gay! Just the rumor would be enough to ruin both of their careers – and quickly. To me, taking a punch seemed like a lot better option.

Then, tossing my keys over to Cody, I let her know she was driving us to the arena today. My excuse was that I was waiting for my Advil to kick in. The reality was that I honestly felt like shit. Sure, maybe my headache had faded to a dull throb, but the rest of me still felt like warmed-up bull snot.

Seeing my girlfriend behind the wheel of my truck, however, was hot. Yeah, she had the seat pushed all the way

forward, but she drove this thing like it was a part of her. When we pulled into the arena, she headed around back to find a parking space that wouldn't be too obvious. Unfortunately, this was where we had to separate.

“Go on,” I told her. “Get checked in, draw your bull, get your gear set up. I'll be right behind you.”

She looked over at me and pushed out a heavy breath. “You know you're still allowed to be my friend, right?”

I chuckled at her. “Yeah, because none of those guys will wonder why Tanner is so ok with this? Because no one's gonna stop to ask why I'm not chasing every buckle bunny out there? Cody, I dunno how to break this to you, but if we don't want questions about this thing we're doing, then we're gonna have to hide it.”

She pushed her next breath out through her nose. “It's fucking stupid,” she grumbled as she got on the truck.

“It is,” I agreed, “but the only reason any of us guys can wrap our minds around someone wanting to spend time with a girl? It's to get laid.”

She just shut the door in my face, then went to the back seat and opened that one. “Because you'd never talk to a girl unless you wanted to sleep with her?”

Yeah, that was the problem. I wouldn't. I had bull riding to keep me entertained, the guys to drink beer with, and women to make me feel good. That was how I'd been doing this for years, and every other man on this tour with us was doing the exact same thing.

“We also don't want people to think about why your boyfriend is spending time with your mentor,” I pointed out, hoping that would get me out of this.

So she grabbed her bag, nodded at me, then stepped back. “Then I'll see you inside.”

I sat there in the passenger seat, watching her in the rearview mirror. This fucking hangover made me feel like an even bigger asshole than I usually did. Sadly, she was right.

The way we guys thought about women was exactly why she was getting so much shit in the PBR.

It all basically boiled down to the fact that we were men, she was delicate, and this was a dangerous sport. Therefore, it made sense to us that she couldn't keep up. Chasing her out was just doing her a favor. It was our way of protecting her. The scariest part of all of that was I could understand how those assholes were thinking. And while I hated to admit it, I may have thought like that myself before I'd met her.

Ten minutes later, I gathered up my stuff and headed inside. The line to the check-in window was short. The woman behind the window passed me a slip of paper with my bull on it. His name was Pumpkin Spice, and I'd never heard of him before. So, I had my phone open, googling any videos of this creature I could find, when I made it into the main room where the riders were warming up.

Cody was in the same place where we'd set up yesterday, but she wasn't alone. Derek Mitchell and Casey Davis were hovering on either side of her. A split second later, I realized Derek was holding a bull rope in his hand, just high enough that Cody wouldn't be able to reach it. She was glaring at him, but refusing to jump for her gear.

Instead, she bent to where her bag rested on the ground and pulled out the backup rope I'd gotten her. Before I could even call out, Casey snatched it from her hands and lifted it the same way Derek was holding the other.

“What ya gonna do now, little girl?” Casey taunted.

“How you gonna ride if you can't even hang on to your rope,” Derek sneered.

My feet started moving faster, but Cody just clenched her jaw, lifted her chin, and looked between the two men. “Keep-away?” she asked. “Real mature, boys. No, I'm impressed. Keep it up.”

Yeah, fuck that. Soon as I was close enough, I tossed my bag beside hers, snatched the rope from Derek's hand, and shoved him out of the way. Pressing Cody's main rope into her

hands, I turned for Casey with my fists clenched, ready to punch that bastard right in the face.

“Give the rope back,” I warned, ready to kill this man for fucking with my girl.

Casey just scoffed. “You’re willing to lose fifteen grand for a woman that won’t even sleep with you? Come on, Ty. Are you really that desperate?”

So I leaned into his face and grabbed him by the collar with both hands. “My momma told me that a real man stands up for a lady. Maybe Cody’s the only lady we got on this tour, but if she needs someone to throw a few fists for her and pay a few fines? Then yeah, I’ll be that guy. My balls are big enough to take it. How about yours, Casey?”

The guy’s hand had dropped when I grabbed him, and that was all Cody needed. She snagged the rope from his fingers. I felt Casey reach for it, so I shook him a little harder, keeping his focus right on me.

“Tell your friends. Anyone who fucks with her, fucks with me.” I added another shake just to make sure he knew I was serious.

“Fuck you, Ty,” Derek grumbled behind me. “We’re just having some fun.”

So I shoved Casey away from me and spun on Derek. “Maybe she didn’t choose me. So fucking what? Unlike you idiots, I know that having a woman on tour is gonna bring twice the media coverage, which means higher paychecks for all of us. So, if you wanna fuck up my future, then I will definitely fuck up yours.”

“What, you her protector now?” Derek huffed.

“Yes.”

Both of the guys flapped their hands at me, grumbling profanities under their breath, but they left. My head was pounding even worse now, but I could also feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. My only regret was that I hadn’t punched Casey first. I should’ve just swung. Damn, that would’ve felt so good.

And then Cody wrapped her arm around my waist and pressed her head against my chest. “Thanks, Ty.”

No, maybe she didn’t sound like she was fawning all over me, but that was ok. She was used to bullying. She’d been putting up with it for as long as she’d been riding cattle. This girl was always braced for the next bad thing that was going to happen to her, and she acted like it was all completely normal.

That bothered me.

Which was when I realized I’d just found my place. J.D. might be her mentor. Tanner was her official boyfriend. Me? I’d just named myself her protector, which gave me a damned good reason to follow her around like the desperate man I was.

Because someone had to keep her safe. This shit wasn’t about to stop, and the assholes who wanted to chase her off were getting more and more brave. Back in Tulsa, it had been a greased rope. Now it was childish games of keep-away and getting in her face. I didn’t even want to think about what came next.

But if I was here, then nothing would happen to her. Besides, my little excuse about the media attention increasing our paychecks wasn’t a lie. I knew it could go either way, but having a woman make history in anything tended to make the world take note.

And the more people who looked at Cody, the closer I wanted to be to her. The more I wanted to keep her safe. Protector? Yeah, so far as I cared, that was a real good reason to act on all this confusing shit I’d been feeling about her. Protectors stayed close. They were hands-on. To me, all that sounded like the things I wanted to do anyway, and I might even be able to show her the things I hadn’t figured out how to say yet.

CHAPTER 28



I WASN'T EVEN PISSED about Derek and Casey fucking with me. It was exactly the sort of thing I expected. For as long as I could remember, the cowboys had picked on me, trying to make it clear I wasn't one of them. Well, too bad for them, I didn't care about that.

I was here to ride bulls. I'd come to earn a check. I had J.D., Tanner, and Ty as friends - and more, but the assholes trying to chase me off didn't need to know that. I wasn't alone, I wasn't helpless, and I would *not* be scared off the Tough Enough series tour.

And while I appreciated Ty coming to my rescue, I also hated it. I despised knowing that the only reason those idiots had stopped was because a *man* had stepped up. I hated the fact that I was too short to simply take my rope back, too new to risk my place on the circuit with a kick to the balls or a punch in the gut. I just fucking hated that being a woman made the rest of the world think I couldn't do this!

Was that why the sponsors hadn't been eager to sign with me yet? Max had done his best, I was sure of that. I just had no idea how I was supposed to prove myself. I'd ridden good yesterday. I was fifth, which was definitely in the top ten. I also knew I could get bucked off and lose it all, and the anxiety was starting to build because this was what I'd dedicated my life to. If I failed now, I'd probably never get another chance.

But Ty had stepped up, so I grabbed him around the waist for a hug. He kept it casual, but a few seconds later, he set up

his gear beside me, just like he had yesterday. I tossed my rope over the panel provided for that purpose, then let out all my anger as I worked rosin into the fibers.

“You ok?” Ty finally asked.

“Yep,” I promised.

“Cody, it’s ok to be pissed,” he assured me.

I nodded once, then yanked my glove down the rope again. “Oh, I’m pissed,” I promised. “Doesn’t mean I’m not ok.”

“That’s my girl,” he praised.

I glanced over to find him smiling at me. Ty was always so careful about what he said in public, so aware of what might cross a line somewhere. I didn’t normally worry about it because I knew they’d talk shit about me no matter what I did, but hearing him say that?

“Oh, *your* girl?” I asked, keeping my voice down.

His lips curled into a smile even as his focus returned to his own rope. “Yep. First woman on the top circuit of the PBR. Figure you’re kinda all of ours, and that’s the story I’m stickin’ with.”

It was like he’d finally figured something out, but I couldn’t ask what here. Not where everyone walking past could hear us. In the time it had taken to deal with Casey and Derek, the area had gotten even more crowded, which meant we had to be getting close to start time.

So where were Tanner and J.D.?

“Hey, you seen the guys?” I asked as I pulled out my chaps and started putting them on.

Music was starting to play in the arena, letting me know the show was warming up. Today, I was riding in fifth place, which put me near the end. J.D. had come in third, and Ty was in first. So while I buckled on my chaps, I tried to figure out which of us would pull ropes for the others, but I wasn’t quite sure the timing would work out. It was just too close together.

Like me, Ty was putting on his chaps. “I have a feeling one of them is moving a little slow,” he said when our heads were close enough together. “Tanner won’t be late, though.”

“Ok,” I breathed as I stood back up. “But I’m basically ready.”

Ty grunted and hurried up with his last buckle. “Wanna go watch the scores?”

“Sure,” I agreed.

Snagging my rope from the panel, that went over my shoulder. My glove and tape went in my helmet. My hat went on my head. My protective vest was already on, even if I hadn’t zipped it up. I’d managed to get my spurs on before the assholes had gone for my rope, so I was as ready as I was going to get.

Ty needed a little longer. While he got his spurs on and shrugged into his vest, I found his favorite glove, then a full roll of tape, and put those in his helmet the way I had mine. When I passed it over, the smile he gave me was the sweetest thing I’d ever seen.

This was the Ty I liked most. This version made my heart beat a little faster and I had to struggle not to bite my lip or blush like an idiot. Every so often, it hit me that I was with two of the best bull riders in the sport, and they weren’t strangers.

No, Ty and J.D. had become friends. They were more than that, but friends was a very safe word, and one I could let slip accidentally. I still didn’t really understand what these guys saw in me, but I wasn’t stupid enough to ignore the chance to enjoy it.

So when Ty pressed a hand to my back and led me towards the chutes, I followed willingly. Outside the main room was a long walk through the cattle pens, and that was where Ty was headed. Not to the chutes, which were probably packed with riders waiting their turns. He led me over to a narrow alley that would let the staff check on the animals, then dropped his

helmet and glove by his feet before propping a boot up on one of the bottom rails of the pen.

“Over there,” he said, pointing, “is the score board. Out here, we won’t get shit from the rest of the riders, but we also won’t miss when our bulls start filling in.”

“Nice,” I said, putting my helmet beside his. “Cheyenne is nothing like Tulsa or St. Louis, huh?”

“Open arena,” he told me. “Changes more than you’d think. The whole setup is a mess because this place isn’t really made for PBR.”

“Or maybe it’s because PBR is designed to be in a closed convention center?” I countered.

He chuckled. “That too.” Then he shifted over a bit to be a little closer. “You rode good yesterday, though.”

“You did too,” I reminded him. “Got a ninety-one on a mediocre bull. Does this mean you’re gonna start putting some effort into this?”

His warm eyes caught mine. “Think I should?”

“Ty!” I huffed. “I think you’re one of the cleanest and most technically correct riders I’ve ever seen! Why do you think I studied you for so long? I mean, you’re too big to be a bull rider, but you still manage to make it look easy. Sure, J.D. places high, but he also risks everything. I have a feeling you could score just as well without all the injuries.”

“Might make it harder for you to score,” he teased.

I smacked his arm. “Believe it or not, I have been listening to you two.”

“And?” he asked.

I shrugged, feeling a little self-conscious when it came to talking about my own riding. “I’m trying to learn as fast as I can. I mean, I’m spurring now. That’s an improvement, right?”

“It is,” he agreed. Then his smile warned me some teasing was coming. “Means we need to up our game a little more, eh? I’ll ride more aggressively if you will.”

I looked at him again, trying to find the joke in that. Instead, I found an honest offer. No, a challenge. Unable to stop it, a little smile began to tug at my mouth, so I thrust my hand at him.

“No quitting until Finals,” I decided. “Winner buys the loser dinner.”

“Oh, a date?” he asked.

“In public,” I said. “No take-backs.”

He slapped his hand against mine, and shook. “Cody, that’s the kind of bet I have no intention of losing.”

“And if you ride hard enough, you might even have the million dollar check to pay for it,” I pointed out. “I mean, you have a real chance, Ty. I say go for it.”

“Then you had best win Rookie of the Year,” he told me. “Means we’d be on stage side-by-side. I think that’s a poster I’d definitely wanna keep.”

My smile broke free and I glanced down, trying to hide it. “Can you imagine?”

“I can,” he said. “First woman to ride in the top series, first female Rookie of the Year. Yeah, I’ve been imagining, hun, and I think you can really do it. That’s why I fucking hate those assholes giving you shit, so just don’t ever let them chase you off, ok?”

“Promise.” But my problem was a little more immediate than some jerks holding my rope out of my reach. “I’m honestly more worried about getting sponsors.”

“They’ll come,” he assured me. “Cody, it’s only your third event.”

“Yeah, but I’m still the girl,” I reminded him. “Means I have to be better than you guys to be taken seriously.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before a bellow carried out of the concrete buildings and all the way over to us. The first time, I couldn’t make out the words, but I was pretty sure I knew the voice. The second time, however, I was sure of it.

“Where’s my goddamned rookie!” J.D. was screaming, and he sounded pissed.

Ty snorted out a laugh, but when I turned to head that way, he caught my arm. “Don’t run when he calls,” Ty warned. “You’re not his bitch. He’ll make it out here. Trust me, this is typical J.D.”

Sure enough, the man in question walked out of the building only a second later. “Someone had best tell me where my rookie went!” J.D. snapped.

One of the men watching over the bulls pointed, his hand aimed right in my direction. That was enough to make J.D. walk a little faster. The moment he saw my face, his split into a grin, and he ducked into the narrow walkway to join us.

“Guys were talking about someone fuckin’ with ya,” he explained.

“Handled it,” Ty promised.

I just groaned. “Derek and Casey thought playing keep-away with my rope was a great joke because I’m short.”

“You are kinda short,” J.D. agreed. “Just right for a little guy like me.” Then he jerked his chin at Ty. “Thanks, man.”

“Didn’t do it for you,” Ty assured him.

J.D. just looked back at the flow of traffic between the main building and the bucking chutes, then at Ty again. The gesture was obvious. He was letting Ty know that comment was in case it had been overheard.

“Shit,” Ty muttered. “Tanner’s already made it clear he’s cool with us hanging out. You might be her mentor, but that doesn’t mean I can’t teach her a thing or two.”

“And Ty just bet me that he can ride seriously,” I added, wanting to talk about anything but Derek and Casey making me feel stupid.

Right on cue, Ty groaned. “Thanks, Cody. Now I’m gonna get shit from him too.”

“Yup,” J.D. agreed.

But that was all he said. I had a funny feeling it was all that was needed. And yet, while we'd been talking, the lower-ranked riders had been riding. Scores were starting to fill up the board across from us. I couldn't help but glance over, making note of the fact that most were in the mid to upper 80s. That meant my score yesterday wasn't as good as I'd hoped.

"So if Ty needs to be serious, then what do I need to focus on?" I asked them, flicking a finger at the board. "If I wanna get those sponsors so I can keep doing this, I have to stay on my game too, right?"

"You're fine," Ty assured me.

J.D. thrust out his lower lip and leaned in. Like Ty, he propped a boot up on the bottom rail of the cattle pen before us. That put me in the middle, but I kinda liked it.

"You're ridin' the bulls like you fuck a man, I bet," J.D. said.

I huffed as my attention jumped over to him. "J.D.!"

"What?" he asked, feigning innocence. "Most girls are like that. We get 'em naked, they fall under us, then react to what we do."

"He's not wrong," Ty agreed.

"So I need to, what?" I asked. "Fuck better?"

"Naw," J.D. said. "Cody, ya need to be bold enough to take what you want. Ride him. The bull, I mean. Get in there. Make him get his hips where you want 'em. Show him how hard you like it. That's what I'm talkin' about."

Ty snorted out a laugh, even as he was trying his hardest to smother it. "Isn't that called topping from the bottom or something?"

"Shit," J.D. grumbled. "Fuck if I know. It's called not bein' embarrassed to get as much as I give."

Which was when I realized what these two were laughing about. This time, it wasn't me! J.D. was all but saying he'd been the one to get fucked. My mouth fell open and I gaped at

him, honestly surprised by that. He didn't notice for a moment, but when he did, I swore his cheeks may have gotten darker.

"What?" he asked.

"You and..." I lowered my voice. "You know. I just figured he'd be, like, taking it."

"Shit," J.D. drawled. "Cody, I'm gonna have to teach you a whole lot. I mean, your boyfriend's a wild boy, I'll give ya that." Then he leaned in to bump my shoulder. "And I kinda like him. Enough for that to happen."

"I'm happy for you," Ty said.

J.D. just nodded. "Yeah. I'm kinda happy for me too. Got me a damned good rookie, a bullfighter on my side, and one hell of a good friend. I'm thinking this year might be the best I've had yet."

"Aww..." Ty said, being all dramatic about it. "Gonna make me get all up in my feels if you keep that up, man."

"Then ride like you got a pair," J.D. taunted. "Because my girl's gonna put you to shame. Shit, you're sitting at number one right now, but Cody's on a roll."

Which was exactly what I needed to hear. J.D., the best bull rider in the Tough Enough series, thought I was doing just fine. The worries spinning through my head were lying to me, because J.D. knew more than I did, and I was going to convince myself of that. Or at least act like I had.

"And I've learned how to spur," I reminded them, holding on to my latest success.

So J.D. leaned close to my ear. His next words came out as a whisper, and the kind that sent shivers down my spine like a promise.

"Just gotta teach ya how to take what you want. Promise I'm up for the job."

CHAPTER 29



THERE WERE four bulls on a side. That meant I was in a different group than the guys. Riding in fifth place, my bull would be the last one in the next-to-last group of bulls. It would give me just enough time to get done and help both J.D. and Ty strap in.

So when the list got short enough, the three of us headed up to the catwalk behind the chutes. J.D. and Ty were bickering over who'd pull my rope, but I ignored them to look out at the arena. There, Tanner's purple shirt caught my eye.

Cletus was rambling on about something, the bullfighters all looked like they were catching their breath, and the sky was dark. Those massive stands of lights lit everything up, and the swarms of bugs around them may as well have been halos. The smell of gunpowder - or whatever the pyrotechnics used - added a scent to the mix of sweaty men and bull shit. I loved all of it.

Then Tanner looked up, his straw hat making the gesture obvious. I could almost feel it when his eyes found me, so lifted my hand in a shy little wave. His face split into a grin, and he blew me a kiss. That made the crowd on the other side laugh, which made *me* turn to see Tanner on the big screen over my head.

Yep, we were a spectacle. I kinda hated it. Not that I didn't adore Tanner, or the way he treated me. And I was happy for the guy, since it sounded like last night had gone pretty good for him and J.D. The part that annoyed me was what Jake had

pointed out the other day. No matter what I did, the PBR wanted to make it a big deal.

Didn't matter if that was dating a perfectly normal guy, riding well, or even getting bucked off. If *I* did it, then it was big news, and the pressure was starting to build. J.D. had said all I needed to do was ride this bull, just this one. I didn't need to worry about anything else, but how could I not?

"Hey," Ty said from right behind me. "I'm pulling for you."

I glanced back, the brims of our hats almost colliding. "Yeah?"

He nodded once. "Yep, since I go last this time, I got more time between us. You ok with that?"

There was something in the way he said that, almost like he was bracing for rejection, so I nodded quickly. "I figured one of the chute guys would pull for me, so yeah. You do a much better job."

His smile looked relieved. "Who ya riding?"

"Monologue," I said, listing the same bull J.D. had ridden the day before.

"And he's lazy," Ty muttered. "Yeah. Just spur the shit out of him and you should be fine."

I jiggled my head again, hearing him but also knowing that. Spur. It was always spur more, spur bigger, or even spur better. I kept hoping someone would tell me something I didn't know, like some secret to making it to the top, but it seemed there wasn't one.

Then J.D. pressed my rope into my hands from the other side. "Your side's being loaded."

I turned back, intending to grab my helmet and glove, only for Ty to hand them to me. The guys were both hovering, and I knew it. The real question was why, so looking from Ty to J.D. and back, I tried to figure it out.

"What?" I asked.

Ty's eyes jumped to J.D., and my mentor just shrugged. "You look nervous," J.D. said. "Promise you can ride this fucker. He'll be nothin' for ya."

"Yeah, but I need the scores this weekend," I reminded him.

"So get 'em," J.D. shot back. "Stop acting like a girl, Cody, and cowboy up."

"She is a girl!" Ty snapped.

"Don't mean she has to act all wimpy and shit," J.D. countered. "Fuck that, Ty."

"Look," Ty told me, "don't worry about the sponsors. You're doing fine so far, and we'll make sure you can get to the next event, no matter what. You're qualified, Cody. That's the big thing."

"I'm qualified," I mumbled under my breath as I headed over to the pen my bull would be in.

There were three riders to go before me, and Cletus was currently doing his jokes, so I had time. Time to think, which wasn't really a good thing. The bit these guys didn't understand was that I needed this. I wasn't here to prove I was a badass. I wasn't trying to make history. I was just trying to ride my way into a better life than what I'd left back in Missouri.

That was why being a bull rider mattered so much to me. Back home, people grew up and got married, settled down to have some kids, and went to church on Sunday. Every blue moon, someone managed to break the cycle. My daddy had tried, and he'd had a real shot at it, up until Mom had died.

Then he'd given everything up for me.

All my life, I'd watched that man wake up, go to work, come home, take care of me, and count the minutes of his life passing him by. He'd had big dreams - and the skill to make them a reality - but he'd ended up with none of it because of a stupid car accident! For twenty-two years, he'd just been going through the motions because there weren't any other options for people like us.

So if I wanted to make a few new chances for myself, I had to get sponsors. I had to ride the shit out of these bulls, make sure I got noticed, and bank enough money to buy myself a new life for after I got hurt. I wasn't dumb enough to think I'd be the next big thing, but I was damned sure going to make myself big enough to get noticed.

The clank of the gate made all of us look over as Wes Gilbert came out of the chute. His bull took a big ol' leap, flying up into the air, and the poor guy was pushed back. While the clock on the far wall spun out the seconds, the cowboy did his best to cling to that bull's back. He almost managed, too.

A split second before the buzzer went off, Wes was in the air, but that boy hung on to his rope. The pyrotechnics went off, Wes slammed into the ground, and the screens around the arena all declared that his ride was under review, which bought me a few more seconds.

"Hat," Ty demanded.

I traded that for my helmet, flipping my hair up. While I worked that on and secured the buckles, J.D. was holding out my glove and tape. It was a little too much help, but they were pretty cute. Soon enough, I was passing my rope over to the chute guys to work under Monologue, and the crowd was cheering another full ride.

"Your bull should be moving in," Ty told J.D. "Promise I got this."

"Take care of my rookie," J.D. said, slapping Ty's arm even as he caught my eye. "This bull," he told me. "Just this one, Cody."

Ride him like I fucked. Just this bull. Spur. Yeah, I was pretty sure I had it, and as I stepped over into the chute to start working on my rope, those words spun through my mind like a mantra. The chute beside mine opened, rider and bull burst into the arena, but that didn't matter. On this side, Ty could pull my rope from the alley.

"Tighter," I told him.

He caught the tail and pulled hard enough to make this fat red bull grunt. That was when I started warming up the rope. I wanted it sticky. Real sticky. If I was going to get in there and make this bad boy do what I wanted, I needed something holding me on.

When that was ready, I reached down to repeat the process on the handle. Around me, the world began to fade. I tugged the handle to the side, setting it up right where I wanted - the same place Ty had suggested back in Tulsa. When I glanced at Ty again, he pulled even harder, making sure it was all secure. Sinking down as close to the bull as I could get, I completed my wrap and then eased myself onto my bull's back.

Fat was an understatement. I could feel the padding under my thighs, and Monologue didn't seem to like my legs in his armpits. Didn't matter, though. The arena was empty. The crowd was waiting. I was in the zone, and this was my time.

I nodded.

The gate clanked as the latch released. The hinges creaked as the metal swung open. I pushed my far heel into Monologue's fat ribs, and the bull got the hint. As soon as there was enough space for him to get out, he exploded.

Up. The lights were so bright that I couldn't see the stars beyond, but I shouldn't be looking up there. Pulling my chin back down to my chest, I found my center, locked my core, and dragged both heels up Monologue's sides. He repaid me by kicking his heels up high.

Unlike J.D., I didn't weigh much. For this fat fucker, I probably felt like nothing, and I made him buck his heart out. Ride like I fucked? Well, I was going to ride him the way I wanted to be fucked. My hips were right up on my hand, rolling with every movement of this bull, and as I spurred, I pulled my legs up so high that my knees were above the bull's back.

When his head came up, I pushed him to the left. When his ass flew into the air, I leaned back, seeing my chaps flying around my legs at the edge of my vision. I had this, and I knew I did, but I wanted more.

Which was when this bad boy decided to double back. Monologue did a dirty reverse buck, throwing my body forward. I leaned, unable to stop it, then let his next rear put me back in place. I didn't fight it. Nope, I rolled with it, taking what he had to give and demanding more. Right now, I was his master, and this boy was going to do everything I asked.

He turned to the right, forcing me to ride out of my hand. This was supposed to be the hard way, but I could handle it. I just wanted more kicks, and my bull was getting tired. I felt his hops getting weaker and his kicks weren't as intense, so I had to work for it.

For just a moment, it was me and the bull. Nothing else mattered. I forgot about the crowd, ignored the judges and the sponsors. I didn't even care about the guys. Somewhere back there, people were cheering for me to keep riding, spur him, and whatever else they always said, but my attention had narrowed to nothing more than me and this bull.

Every twist of my hips shifted his shoulders. The feel of my heels running up his thick skin worked his ass. The harder I pushed into my hand, the more he wanted to get me off, so I pushed. Like a tick on his back, I did my best to annoy him just enough to keep him going, and it was working!

From the edge of my vision, I saw the fireworks filling the back line of the arena. At the side, I caught a flash of purple. I knew I'd made eight seconds, but I kept riding for two more, just to prove I could. Only then did I lower my arm and flip my wrap over, releasing myself.

The next time Monologue's rump hit the ground, I slid off the side and jogged away, landing easily on my feet. The sounds of the world rushed back in, and I wrenched off my helmet to check the scores. I'd nailed that! I'd just ridden the fuck out of that bull!

"Woo!" I cried, watching as Monologue hurried out of the arena.

"That's my rookie!" J.D. screamed.

I pumped the air with my fist, so sure I'd made the impression I'd been hoping for, and turned towards Tanner. Jorge passed him my rope, then Tanner jogged my way with the biggest smile on his face. Clearly he'd seen that. He knew I'd aced it.

Then his smile faded.

His eyes were over my shoulder, which let me know the score had just posted. Curious, I turned to check the board and felt my heart crash to my toes: 85.25. Scanning the list of the other riders, I realized I was still sitting in the average, but closer to the bottom now. Thankfully, my second full ride meant I was currently in third - and going to drop as the next four riders got their scores.

"What the fuck?" Tanner asked as he reached my side to pass me my rope.

"I felt like I nailed that," I told him.

"You did!" he insisted. "Cody, that score's shit."

"Yeah, but the bull wasn't that great," I realized, trying to push it away. Then I clasped his arm. "Hey, thanks. Stay safe out here, ok?"

"We good?" he asked. "After last night, I mean."

So I leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Very good. Promise I have no complaints."

"Good, then get your ass out of my arena." Then he winked and jogged back towards his guys.

I headed for the gate, but inside my guts were twisting. I'd ridden the best I could and had nothing to show for it. How the fuck was I supposed to get those sponsors if I couldn't pull off the scores?

CHAPTER 30



CODY'S SCORE appeared on the screen and I threw my damned rope across the catwalk. Some guy jumped out of the way, glancing back at me with fear in his eyes. Damn straight. And when I went to get my rope back, he scurried like a roach to make sure he wasn't between me and it.

The score for my rookie's ride was bullshit. Still, with her ride done, I was almost up. The chutes were rattling and banging as the cattle did their best to refuse moving all the way through. Cletus was yammering on about something that was supposed to be both funny and kid-safe. I was eyeing my ride.

"Looks like that chick won't be a problem for long."

The voice belonged to Austin and came from my right. I glanced over to see him giving me a shit-eating grin. Too bad for him, that look just made the scar on his face easier to see. The same scar I'd put there when he'd grabbed her tits.

"Man, every time you open your mouth, you just sound dumber than the last," I assured him. "I mean, a fuckin' rookie has you scared shitless? Fuck. No wonder I never see you standing on the bullpen."

For the awards was what I meant, and he damned well knew it. Thankfully, the bulls were settled into their spots, and his chute guy asked for a rope. That meant Austin needed to focus on getting his shit together, and fast. On the upside, the idiot couldn't talk to me while he did that.

I still kept my eye on him, which was why I missed Cody coming up behind me. The little rascal snagged my rope off my shoulder. I spun, ready to throw down with whoever thought they could fuck with me, only to see her pass my rope to the closest chute guy.

“I’m pulling for you, J.D.,” she said, tilting her head towards my bull.

“Hey,” I said, catching her hip before she could turn away. “You ok?”

Those pretty blue eyes of hers jumped up to mine guiltily. “Why?”

I gave her a disgusted look, because we both knew she’d been a ball of stress all day. That score? It was shit, which meant she was faking the fuck out of things right now.

Cody grimaced, knowing she was busted. “It’s still a qualified ride, right?”

“That’s my rookie,” I praised. “Now get that damned rope tight.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before Austin’s chute opened and the dumb-fuck was on his ride. The big black bull he was on surged up with a rounded back, and that fucker’s seat was already out of place. Austin’s head snapped up to the sky. His back rounded to match the bull’s, and when they hit the ground, Austin’s chin cracked down right between the beast’s horns.

Fucker deserved it too. Still, he had enough experience that he managed to pull through, at least for a bit. My eyes jumped to the clock, seeing five seconds, then back to Austin. Beside me, Cody was tense, every muscle in her body frozen in complete concentration as she watched.

Then it happened. The bull dumped a shoulder as he spun to the left, right out of Austin’s hand. It was all over after that ‘cept for the cryin’, so I slapped Cody’s arm and stepped into my own chute. She waited a couple seconds longer, until our little boy toy got the animal out of the way. When she stepped over the rails, it was like a goddamned pro.

“Tail,” she demanded of the guy linking everything together.

He passed it over with a bit of a shocked look. Now, maybe it was all that pink on her, but these boys were gonna learn that this girl was the real deal sooner or later. Pink might be real pretty, but that didn't make it weak, and Cody was a whole lot of all that - especially the not weak part.

When she pulled, she put her all into it. Oh, I hadn't left my rope alone this time, so I knew it wouldn't be cut. I still kept a damned eye on her. I couldn't help it. This girl had her claws in me real deep, and I'd throw a damned ride to make sure she didn't pay for it. Right now, however, I needed to prove to her that I could keep up.

“Tighter,” I demanded before reaching over to warm up my rope.

She braced, her little feet poking through the rails and those cute little boots just about even with my chin. When I yanked on the rope, she didn't even budge. Much better than last time. Again, then again, I worked that rosin until it was stringing out, and then I got my handle to the same state.

But my bull wasn't the friendly kind. Just as I got the handle set, he decided he was gonna make Cody pay for his misery. The fucker went up, slinging his head - and horns - back her way. I took a rough hit in the thigh, but didn't care since it wasn't my balls. Cody? She just leaned, getting out of the way without a hint of fear.

When the bull tried it again, I yelled, “Someone put a rope over his head if you want me to get my fucking rope on!”

Immediately, three different guys scrambled to do just that. The next time my bull threw his head up, his horns hit the rope and he was convinced he couldn't go that way anymore. Then Cody pulled, not even needing me to ask.

I quickly got my handle where I needed, jerked my chin at her for even more, and then made my wrap. From the corner of my vision, I saw as she crossed back to the catwalk, but my real attention was on adding an extra pass of the rope between

my fingers, because this guy had some go in him, and I needed to tie myself in.

I also didn't want Cody to see me pulling a suicide wrap.

But the second I was sure she was out of the way, I dropped down onto the bull's back. His muscles tensed, but it was already too late. I nodded. The chute clanked. He had a way out, so this ton of beef took it.

He didn't turn so much as sling me to the side as he left the chute. I shoved my knees so hard against his sides that he shouldn't've been able to breathe, but my ass still slid. A swing of my arm got me back to center, and then his ass came up. Oh, so this bad boy wanted to play? I was down for that.

I could feel the strain in my weak leg as I pulled my legs up, letting the judges see my spurs working. I let my arm fly, using the force of it to keep me in the center when he landed. This shit was almost too easy, and either those judges were fucking Cody on her scores, or they were just scoring low. I wanted to make sure I knew which it was.

So I put my all into it. I rode like I was eighteen years old, back before I'd busted myself up so bad. I rode this bull like I knew the girl of my dreams was watching. I rode this fucker like the man I had a crush on might give a shit. In other words, I put everything I had into it.

Kicks, spins, bucks, and more. The dust flew off the beast's white, brown, and black hide, and I could feel the animal grunt as it fought to get me off its back. I just added a little more pressure, keeping my balls right up against my fist, and I wasn't going anywhere. Not until the flashy display of fireworks and lights went off, making it clear I'd pulled another eight seconds out of my ass.

Now, the trick was getting my hand free. A tug got the first half of the wrap off, and the bullfighters were moving in. A yank tweaked my pinky, but the rope relaxed and I could pull my hand out. I was about to hop off the side when the bull spun into me.

I tilted. He dropped his head. Making my decision, I made a hard exit, hitting the ground with a loud grunt, but I was on the wrong fucking side! I caught a flash of white and tried to dodge, but it was already too late.

The center of that fucker's head hit me right in the gut. My feet came off the ground, but I wasn't panicking yet. Naw, I'd taken a few hits in my life. The bull flung his head, I went over his shoulder, and again I hit the ground. The problem came when I couldn't get a breath, my head was spinning, and I wasn't sure which way to run.

I still tried. One hand dug into the sand. I scrambled, trying to get out of the way so the bullfighters could take over, but I'd pissed this beast off.

"Down!" Tanner yelled.

I had just enough time to pull my arms to my chest before the bull was on me. His head hit my hip. My body flipped over, and there was nothing but chaos. I felt legs. I felt hair. The world spun, flipped, and skittered out of control as sparks of pain lit up my body.

"Ha!" someone yelled.

I tried to pull in a breath, but still couldn't.

"Get the fuck *off* him!" That was Tanner.

"Ho!"

Yellow. Red. Purple. I saw the shoes. I also saw the bull's legs. Sand from the arena was floating all around me, lit from the lights into a prism of iridescent colors. The guys were moving. The bull kept turning. I couldn't pick my damn ass up, so I just closed my eyes and tried to pull in a motherfucking breath!

When I opened them again, I saw purple. Tanner. He was between me and the bull. He wasn't standing still, but he also wasn't leaving me. Red and yellow moved. They darted. They got the beast turned away, but Tanner stayed, leaving his crew for me.

Finally, that bull decided to take his leave of us, charging the exit gate like one of those Spanish things. The moment he was out of sight, however, Tanner spun to drop down at my side.

“J.D.?” he asked.

I waved him off, daring to flop over on my back and stretch out. Thankfully, the moment my body wasn't crunched up, my diaphragm decided it was time to work again. I sucked in the biggest, sweetest gulp of air I'd had in a real long time.

“Fuck,” I breathed as I pushed it back out.

Tanner just chuckled and offered me a hand. “Yeah, sorry about that. I tried to turn him before he hit you.”

“Means you can make it up to me later,” I said as I let him help me to my feet.

But as I reached for the straps holding on my helmet, I heard the crowd clapping. That meant they'd expected me to be taken out on a stretcher. So, once I had my head out, I lifted an arm to make it clear I was ok, then slapped Tanner a few times on the back.

I wanted to hug him. Shit, I wanted to kiss the guy for taking care of me. I also knew better, so this was the best I had. And yet, when I limped a step towards the gate, Tanner ducked under my arm, grabbed me around the waist, and gave me an assist.

“Take it,” he said softly. “You just got run over, and this is one thing I can do.”

I looked over to see his pretty eyes waiting. Yeah, he got it. He knew what I was thinking. I was also pretty sure he was thinking the same. Sadly, the best I had was a nod of appreciation.

“And,” Tanner said, “you're spending a few hours with sports medicine this evening.”

“Fuck,” I groaned.

But he was right. I also had a funny feeling he'd get Cody on his side, and between the two of them? Yeah, it would be

easier to just give in and get treated. Fuck my pride. Fuck the jokes Austin would throw at me later. For these two, I'd take all of it.

“I'll head to the doc soon as Ty's done,” I promised.

“Good boy,” Tanner told me.

This time, I couldn't hide the smile. I just hoped no one else knew how those words made my heart beat faster.

CHAPTER 31



CODY WAS GRIPPING the railing while Tanner did everything possible to keep that bull from dancing on J.D.'s head. The idiot wasn't getting up, though. When they finally got the bull out of the way, I saw J.D. roll onto his back and understood. We'd all had the wind knocked out of us a few times, and getting rolled the way J.D. had without being able to breathe? Yeah, not fun.

"He's ok," I assured her.

Cody just looked up at me like I had lost my mind. "That bull just ran over him!" she hissed.

"And this is J.D.," I reminded her. "He got the wind knocked out of him. He's fine, Cody."

She nodded, but that wasn't the same as believing me. Still, if I could keep her safe from worrying about him, then I'd do my best. Thankfully, J.D. got his ass up and limped back with Tanner's help only a second later. Then, the moment he was out of the gate, Jake climbed into his chute and started getting ready. I went right after him.

Passing over my rope, I traded my hat for my helmet. Cody was beside me, waiting like a loyal assistant. The problem with that was the crew starting to gather up behind us: Derek, Casey, and Eli. Yeah, all of Austin's cronies.

"Well, she's making her way through the riders faster than I expected," Eli taunted.

Cody closed her eyes and pushed out a breath, but that was her only reaction. The guys behind her couldn't see it, so I

tried to ignore that shit too. It wasn't easy. Thankfully, the gate clanked and Jake was out, so I climbed in.

Pumpkin Spice was orange - probably where he'd gotten his name. He had a bit of white on his legs, but I was honestly more concerned with the set of curved horns that shot up, right back towards my face. The moment the chute guys got my rope secured around him, he proved he knew how to use them too.

Throwing his head up, Pumpkin Spice tried to shuffle in the cramped chute. This was a good-sized bull. Not so big that he had no room to move, but not small enough to climb out either. Instead, he just fidgeted so damned much that I completely missed Jake's ride. I only knew it was over because Cody climbed her way to the arena side to take the tail of my rope.

"How tight?" she asked.

"Tight," I told her.

A hint of a smile flickered across her lips just before she pulled. Sure enough, Pumpkin Spice had an opinion about that. The fucker went up, and he did it fast enough to take me with him. Not a rear. Oh no, this whole bull surged upwards until I was sitting on him, whether I wanted to be or not.

Cody? She just held on to the rope, keeping it tight enough that the beast had no option but to deal with it. The moment Pumpkin Spice's feet were back on the ground, I got to work. Unfortunately, the cronies couldn't help themselves.

"Seems she's even got the bulls going nuts. See, this is why we don't need women back here." That was Derek.

I looked over to shoot him a dirty look, but I had a feeling the grill on my helmet ruined it. Never mind that none of those guys were paying any attention to me. They were too busy making sure Cody could hear everything they said.

"She's probably on her period or something. Would explain her shit scores," Eli taunted.

"Fuck," Casey added, "that or she's so damned hard up she's jackin' 'em off behind the chutes, thinking it'll help."

“Might,” Eli said. “She’s already turned J.D. and Ty into idiots. Why not the bulls too?”

Derek laughed. “Oh, she’s probably taking it like a train every night. Would explain why that crew suddenly seems to be in such a good mood. Hey, Ty? Can she suck a dick better than she rides?”

Oh, he’d just gone too damned far. Fuck riding. Fuck this bull. I grabbed the railing and heaved myself up, shoving my way out of the chute in a single lunge. Three steps took me across the catwalk and right into Derek’s face - and this time I shoved.

“Leave Cody out of this!” I snapped.

“Oh, I was talking about you,” Derek sneered as his pals tensed up beside him.

I just pointed at all of them, right in their faces, one by one. “I’m watching out for her now. Any of you says shit about her, and I’ll prove I know how to use a beer bottle just as well as J.D.”

“You ain’t even getting laid and she’s got you pussy whipped,” Eli laughed.

I lunged, having every intention of putting that fucker into his grave, but arms closed around my back and slung me around. Before I even knew what had happened, I was pointed back at my chute and J.D.’s hand was making it clear I should get in it.

“Ride. The. Bull,” he growled, that cold look in his eyes.

Yeah, he scared the fuck out of me, but that wasn’t why I obeyed. It was seeing Cody still standing on the gate with my rope in her hands. Pumpkin Spice was roped up. Her head was down, that black hat covering most of her face, but not enough to hide the flush to her skin.

Not a sexy flush. Not a cute one. She was ashamed, and I was dragging that shit out. Still, J.D. was here now to take care of her, and I had a job to do.

I tried to catch her eye as I got back into my chute, but she wasn't helping. Her jaw was set, her legs were braced, and while it might be easy to think she was focused on my rope, I had a feeling that wasn't it.

"What?" I asked as I started warming up my rope.

"Just ride, Ty," she snapped.

Fuck. Yeah, she was real pissed, and I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong. Ok, well, riding was a good way to get out of this. I just had to get my dumbass head in gear and get strapped in. And while my hangover might be gone, I hadn't eaten a thing because of it, and that had my head throbbing for a whole different reason.

I ignored it, making sure my gear was just the way I liked it. Then, when I took the rope from Cody and wrapped my hand, she hopped over to the other side. I wanted to turn and check on her, but the memory of her response a second ago had me staring right at my hand in the handle. A good wrap, a few smacks to make sure my gloved fingers were closed, and I was as good as I was going to get.

But when I eased down onto my bull, he had to have another tantrum. This one wasn't too bad, except he was trying to lean against the inside wall, and my leg wouldn't fit. I tugged. One of the chute guys used his leg to push, and Pumpkin Spice thrashed again.

J.D. said to be aggressive. Cody had made a bet with me. So, with nothing to lose, I decided to just go for it. Dropping down onto the bull's back the way J.D. did, I locked my legs in and nodded at the same time.

The gate clanked. The door swung open. Pumpkin Spice wanted none of it. He started bucking, sure enough, but while he was still in the chute. Three hard jumps in place, and only after those did this asshole decide it was time to leave, and he did it with gusto.

The bull flew. Most of these animals made it a pace outside the chute at best. Pumpkin Spice? He decided we were gonna take a long trip around the arena. Every leap brought all

four of his legs off the ground. Yards passed below us with each buck. The problem was he was flat, so I got in there and put my heels on him.

And he did not like it.

The forward flying bucks immediately became thrashing. Slinging his head, this animal whipped his body around behind him so hard I couldn't stick to it. I felt my seat slipping and used my legs to keep me where I had to be.

That only made it worse. The bull's hips came up with a violent kick, his back slamming into mine and knocking me forward. Another buck, and then he did the same thing again, but this time I rocked just a little too far.

I saw the horn first. I heard the crash as it hit the grill of my helmet, but my head snapped back. My back arched, putting my ass out of position. When we hit the ground, I slipped to the right, and then the bull did it again, but even better.

I tried to turn my head away, but I was going down, and fast. The last thing I saw was orange, and then my ears rang. Pain slammed into me. Sounds became muffled, and I stopped caring about everything.

"He's out!"

"Got the head."

"Give him some incentive!"

"Ok, he's going. Ha! Yah!"

Then I heard a voice I recognized. "We need sports med!" That was Tanner.

I forced my eyes to blink, but all I saw was a bright white spot. I blinked again, a few times, before I realized those were the lights. Why was I lying under arena lights?

Turning my head made me groan, and then someone clasped my shoulder, holding me down. Confused, I tried to pull my leg up, but none of this made any sense. No, wait. I'd just been on a bull. That was why I was under lights. But why was I lying down?

“Hey,” Tanner said. “Ty, you with us?”

“What the fuck?” I asked.

He chuckled as my eyes finally found him, the smile on his face just too fucking nice. “You got KO’d by a bull, man.”

“Fuck that,” I said as I tried to sit up.

This time, the person on my shoulder let me. I wanted to check who that was, but my head was throbbing worse than it had been that morning, and turning from side-to-side was not a good idea. Nope, I just needed to get to my feet so I wouldn’t be hauled out of here like some kind of pussy who couldn’t take it.

Tanner offered me a hand, but I slapped it away. “I’m good, damn it.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” someone called out. I looked over to see Doc Stephens hurrying my way, and that was when it all finally fell into place.

“You called sports med?” I snapped at Tanner, taking a big step into his face.

“Hey!” he huffed, lifting his hands. “You were out cold, Ty.”

“I fucking was not,” I assured him. “I just got my bell rung.”

“Same shit,” he said.

Yeah, but Cody had been watching, so I stepped into him and gave him a little nudge on both shoulders. “You aren’t my boyfriend, so stop trying to treat me like you do her!”

“Easy there,” Jorge said as he tried to get between us.

Tanner just stepped up, proving this fucker really was as crazy as J.D. “This isn’t about who I’m fucking, who you aren’t, or anything else,” he snapped, lifting a hand to point right in my face the way I had with those idiots a minute ago. “This is about you keeping your brains from being scrambled.”

So I slapped his hand out of the way.

Isaac grabbed my arm before I could follow through with a punch. Jorge shoved at Tanner's chest, pushing him back. Doc Stephens moved before me, blocking Tanner out of my sight, and reached for the straps on my helmet.

"You're confused, you're pissed that you didn't score, and you will deal with all of that or I'll put you on medical leave," he warned under his breath.

I just lifted my hands, palms forward to show I was giving up. "I'm good, Doc. Promise."

"He's also hungover," Isaac added.

Doc huffed. "Yeah, and going to be feeling even worse now. C'mon, Ty. You're coming to have a visit with me. That is not a request either."

"Shit," I grumbled, pulling off my helmet to walk obediently at his side. "I'm fine, Doc."

"Probably a concussion," he told me. "So just keep your brain and your dick in check long enough to let me see."

Pushing out a breath, I decided to just give in. Yeah, I'd finally figured out how the hell I could fit into Cody's world, and it seemed I was already screwing it up. Fuck!

CHAPTER 32



J.D. WAS HURTING. Getting run over by that bull had hurt more after he sat down than in the moment. Granted, it was always like that, but I still guilted him into going to sports medicine. Doc Stephens made Ty walk there himself. There were a couple of re-rides still to go, but I was done and definitely not going to be the winner tonight.

As I was gathering my stuff up, Jake fell in place beside me. “Heading back?” he asked.

I gave him a wary look. “Mhm.”

“C’mon, Cody,” he grumbled. “J.D. and Ty are both out of sight. I’m just being a gentleman.”

“Ok,” I relented, but I still wasn’t sure how I felt about this guy.

On the upside, it seemed a few of the bull riders were looking out for me. Emilio was sitting on the floor of the warm-up area, right beside my bag. Gustavo was hanging out beside him, but still standing. My gear was between them.

“What the hell?” I groaned.

Emilio rambled off something in his native language, then Gustavo said, “Saw some fuckers eyeing your shit,” he explained. “Emilio says Renato put him in charge of you.”

I just tossed up my hands in frustration. “Guys! I am not some little doll who needs to be watched every second of every day.”

“More like a rubber fuck-doll!” Austin called out.

Jake just chuckled. “And *that* should explain why a few of us are just hanging out.” He patted my shoulder the same way he would one of the guys. “Cody, take it as a compliment.”

“A compliment?” I scoffed. “Because I can’t handle myself?”

Gustavo waved that off. “Because we think you’re one of us, and riders look out for each other. That’s it.” Then he reached down to offer Emilio a hand up.

“Ya ride gud,” Emilio told me in heavily accented English, but his next words were in Portuguese.

“And,” Gustavo translated, “he says you’re one of the guys, so pull in the claws.” And then the twit winked.

I just huffed as the pair of Brazilian riders sauntered away, looking rather proud of themselves. Well, if that was how they saw it, then there wasn’t much I could do about it, right? That didn’t mean I wanted to encourage it either. I was so sick of feeling smothered over the last few days. Between J.D. and Ty, they’d been hovering.

And Ty had been the worst! That shit he’d pulled at the chutes? Not cool. My embarrassment wasn’t even the worst of it! Ty had taken his focus off his ride and almost gotten himself killed - and it felt like my fault.

All of this felt like my fault, because these guys didn’t believe I could manage without them. Sure, it was cute the first time. Now it was starting to be annoying, but I didn’t want to be an unappreciative bitch. I also didn’t want to get a reputation for being too weak to do this, but I had to admit these three had a point. It was also a lot nicer to have the guys on my side instead of against me.

Weird, but much, much nicer.

“You good?” Jake asked. “Because I’m not gonna babysit your ass. Just maybe be in the same area in case shit goes down.”

“No, I’m good,” I told him. Pausing for a second, I added, “Thank you, Jake.”

“Anytime,” he assured me before turning for his own gear on the other side of the rather large room.

My problem wasn’t really the guys trying to help. Well, not completely that, because being made to feel like I couldn’t do this on my own hurt in a way I couldn’t put into words. Sure, the guys thought they were helping, but they *weren’t*.

The real issue was my score. It was that I’d probably just had the best ride of my life, and the lowest score I’d gotten in a long time. Still, J.D. had only gotten an 89.0 for what he’d pulled off. My bull score was lower than his. I didn’t have the legs to show off my spurring. I’d also been tense and worried about the sponsors - which was the exact opposite of what J.D. had told me to do.

So it was fair. I just wasn’t sure how I was supposed to make up for this! I needed those scores. I had to stay in the top ten, and ideally, my world ranking needed to move up a hell of a lot! If I wanted to make some real money at this, I needed to be considered a top rider, not just a side show to gawk at over the weekends.

While I packed up my gear, then J.D.’s and Ty’s, the event ended. I heard them announce Jake Cunningham as the winner of tonight’s event, but peeking my head out showed I was sitting in fifth place once again. That was the top ten. Hopefully, those sponsors would see that all the scores were lower today than yesterday.

I still couldn’t stop thinking about it. When the whole insanity was finally over, I wasn’t surprised at all when Tanner found me leaning with my back against the rail, still mulling over my issue. I just couldn’t let it go!

“Hey,” he said as he moved in to hook an arm around my waist. “Why do you look like someone kicked your dog? The guys ok?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t headed back there yet,” I admitted. “I mean, half the guys in sports med are undressed, and I dunno...”

He chuckled. “Pretty sure you’ve seen a naked man in your life. Like, I dunno, me.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, even if it was weak. “I promise it’s not that.”

“Then what?” he pressed.

This time, when I pushed out a heavy breath, I let my cheeks puff with it. “Tanner, I rode the shit out of that bull and got an 85?”

“Well, 85.25,” he reminded me. “Fifth place, which made you happy enough last night.”

“But my *score* is lower,” I pointed out. “The sponsors won’t be impressed with that! I’m trying to fill up my vest so I can make some money here, and we both know I’m going to have to work harder than the other rookies, and I feel like the guys are trying to do it for me, which doesn’t help that whole ‘easy mode’ complaint at all.”

“Because you’re a girl,” he said, nodding to show he was keeping up. “Ok, um...” Tanner’s brow furrowed for a second, and then his mouth split into a wicked grin. “Talk to your agent guy. That’s what J.D. would do.”

“Max,” I breathed, realizing he had a point.

So I whipped out my phone and sent off a text. While I was at it, I sent one to my father as well, letting him know I was one of the few still in one piece tonight, but I had some stuff to do. When I got an immediate reply, I expected it to be my dad. Instead, it was Max.

Max:

I’m making my way out of the stands. Want to meet me in that large room behind the chutes?

He meant the room I was currently in, so I let him know I was here and would be waiting. Then my phone vibrated again.

Dad:

The guys going to be ok? Pack up their gear, Cody. Give them a ride back if they need it. You can drive a truck. Lot of riders ate dirt tonight, but I'm still proud of you. Now go be the kind of bull rider you can respect. The friend kind.

I smiled at my phone, which had Tanner leaning in closer. Tilting the screen, I let him read it. A laugh slipped from his mouth as he looked down at where I'd already packed the guys' stuff for them.

"Ok," he told me. "How about I take their gear to them in sports medicine? I took a kick in the back that I want to get checked anyway. You can come with."

"Max is about to meet me - "

"Cody!" Max called out.

"...Here," I finished, flashing Tanner a smile as I waved to let Max know I saw him.

"Then you do what you need to," Tanner told me. "I'll make sure those dumbasses are getting treated, and you can text me when you're done? Or them."

"Thank you," I whispered before leaning in to give him a peck on the lips.

Tanner caught my jaw, pulling me back before I could get too far away, then kissed me a whole lot deeper. I knew Max was right there, and I was supposed to look professional in front of him, yet I still felt myself leaning into Tanner's body, taking just a little more as our tongues danced.

"Now you can go talk to your guy," Tanner told me, bending to grab all three bags.

I looked over at Max to see the guy fanning his face playfully. "Well, looks like that's going well," he said. "So what can I possibly help you with?"

"Sponsors," I said.

“Ah...” He jerked his thumb back towards one of the emptier halls. “I’m pretty sure there are some jockey rooms down here, if you’re ok with that?”

“Yep.”

So he guided me through the maze of concrete halls until the sounds of the bull riders, the crowd, and even the cattle faded to almost nothing. Then, cracking open a door, he gestured for me to proceed him into a quiet little room. Inside, it had a couch, a few chairs, and dozens of pictures of racehorses on the walls.

“Sponsors,” Max said as he dropped into one of the chairs. “What’s the problem with them?”

“My scores!” I insisted, taking a chair of my own.

He nodded slowly. “Your scores are fine.”

“Are they?” I shot back. “C’mon, Max. We both know selling me isn’t going to be as easy as selling one of those guys. I’m a controversy dressed in pink. They made it clear at that meeting that they were only interested in me scoring well enough.”

“They’re playing hardball,” he insisted. “Cody, you’re fine.”

“And if I get bucked off tomorrow, will I *still* be fine?” I asked.

“Yes,” he promised. “Sure, a few of the big names might drop out, but some already have because you won’t wear less.”

Which only made me more angry. “Don’t they understand that I’m trying to ride bulls?!”

He patted the air, calming me down. “No, they don’t. They’re looking for a marketing investment. A few of these brands think the only purpose for a woman is sex appeal. They do not - will not - see you as a person or an athlete. They see you as - ” His mouth snapped shut.

“As what?” I pressed.

His cherubic little face began to turn rather impressively red. “Tits and ass,” he mumbled.

I wasn’t sure if it was the embarrassment on his face for talking like that, or the blatant truth of what he said. I just tilted my head back and laughed, feeling that grip on my guts finally let go. He was right. He was so right, and that wasn’t something I could change. It also wasn’t my fault, which was what really mattered.

“Ok,” I finally said.

“Is it?” he asked.

I flopped my arms, unsure how to answer that. “Well, if you mean the language, then I’m used to it. I’m a bull rider, Max. Them thinking of me like that? I’m used to that too. It’s just that I’m trying so hard to learn all the things and to make it in this sport. I don’t want to fail out before I’ve even gotten started.”

“You’re fine, Cody,” he promised.

“But my scores are lower!” I reminded him. “You don’t understand. That was the best ride I’ve ever had. I was all over it. I had that bull right where I wanted him, and maybe he wasn’t the best, but an 85? It should’ve been at least an 88.”

“And there is sexism in this sport,” he reminded me.

I thrust out both hands, making it clear he’d just proven my point. “That! There is, and if the sponsors are sexist, the judges, the fans... Max, how am I going to make it in the PBR if I can’t change that?”

He leaned forward over his knees, clasped his hands together, and looked at me. “Did you know J.D. came out to me the other day?”

“What?” Never mind that he’d just changed the subject.

Max just nodded. “Yep. I’ve known that man a long time, Cody, and it means a lot to me that he trusted me that much. He also got me you as a client. I know about this thing you’re all doing too. I know about Tanner and Ty. Here’s the thing. I’m not with the PBR. I’m not a bull rider, even though I

always dreamed of doing it.” He chuckled once. “No, I’m your representative. I’m also as good at what I do as you are at what you do, ok?”

“Ok,” I mumbled.

“So trust me when I say that you’re going to be just fine,” he assured me. “I will make sure of it. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy. It sure wasn’t easy when J.D. was making a name for himself with his fists instead of his rides, but I still managed to make him a household name. I will do the same for you, and I give you my word, I am good at this.”

“I believe you,” I said.

That got me a little smile. “Good. So you ride the bulls, and you do it your way. Don’t worry about the sponsors. Sometimes they’ll want to have meetings like that. Other times they’re just quietly looking at you. Be loud. Be proud.” He paused to lick his lips. “And I’m kinda hoping that you’ll do me a real big favor.”

“Ok...?”

“Hit the PBR so hard that when my first client decides he’s ready to come out, he can.”

“J.D.,” I realized. “He was your first?”

“He made my career,” Max explained. “I was a laughingstock until he gave me a chance. Nine years later and I’m one of the most successful brand representatives thanks to him. So you and I are probably on the same side here.”

“Kinda like being a bullfighter,” I realized. “I have to take the hits so that those guys don’t have to?”

“Yeah, exactly like that,” he agreed. “And when you get hit, I’ll scream about it being because you’re a woman. See, here’s the thing with that. No one is trying to say your existence is a sin. They will about those guys, but if we can break one bit of bias, then maybe we don’t have to stop, right?”

I thrust out my hand at him. “I’ll do whatever you tell me, Max, because I’d rather be the hero than the one being

babied.”

He accepted my grip and shook once. “I promise no one’s babying you, Cody. Training, maybe. Babying? Nope. We’re all just protecting our investment in you.”

Which felt a lot better than thinking the guys thought I was weak. “You really are good at this, Max.”

He chuckled again. “Yeah, so are you, Cody. Just worry about riding. I promise I’ve got your back.”

CHAPTER 33



TANNER SHOWED up in sports medicine first, carrying all of our gear. A little over an hour later, Cody snuck in to check on us. We weren't the only people in the main room getting iced down, but she still made sure all three of us were being good. She also demanded to know how we were doing – which was bruised and battered – and how she could help.

I passed her my keys and told her to go back to the hotel and order some food. She tried to resist, which made the other guys in the room chuckle. Yeah, that was one sound she heard a little too loud. Cody hated getting laughed at, so I joked that my balls would hurt if she treated me like I couldn't handle dancing with a bull. She still hesitated for a moment longer, until Ty promised he would give us both a ride home.

After she left, the three of us got a couple hours of torture. The ice wasn't too bad. It was what came after that sucked. Ty had to get a full check for a concussion. He didn't have one, or if he did, it wasn't bad. Tanner had his back poked and prodded because the bull had kicked hard enough to leave a bruise through his padding. As for me, I had a half hour session with Anthony.

Getting run over by a bull wasn't real good for my knee. Or my arm, my shoulder, my back, my hip, my ankle – well, pretty much all of me. Nine years of being on this wild ride had done a number on my body, and I was now paying for it.

When I was finally released, Tanner and Ty were the last pair in the main room, and clearly waiting for me. Ty had his gear slung over his shoulder. Tanner had mine, but when I

reached for it, he gave me a warning look. Since there was no one around to think the wrong thing, I let him have it, but it was a bit of a kick to my pride.

As the three of us headed out to the parking lot, we discussed our injuries. That was a nice, safe topic in case someone was listening. But once we were alone in the darkness found at the back of the arena's parking lot, something shifted, and I could almost feel it.

"I called for sports medicine because you were out cold," Tanner said without any preamble.

Ty scoffed, making it clear that was for him. "Yeah, figured that out."

I just gave him a look. "Is *that* why you shoved him?"

"Well, partly," Ty admitted.

"And the other part?" Tanner asked.

Tossing his bag in the bed of his truck, Ty stopped at the tailgate. "Look, I started with a hangover from hell. Had to make Cody walk in alone, then saw those pricks fucking with her."

"What pricks?" Tanner asked, because he'd missed that part.

"Austin's boys," I explained. "keep-away, thinking she'd jump to get her rope back."

"Fuck," Tanner growled, the one sound I could agree with.

Ty grunted as if Tanner had just proven his point. "Yeah, that. So when she was pulling for me, the same fuckers started talking about her jacking off the bulls or some shit. Like joking about her going through all of us *and* the cattle. Well, she didn't like it none, so I put a stop to it."

"And she don't need you jumping out of the chute like that," I told him.

"She damned well does!" Ty snapped. "Don't you two get it? You're her boyfriend, Tanner. J.D., you're her mentor. Me? What excuse do I have to be close to her at all? She's a

damned rookie from America. She's cute. If I'm chasing her around and hanging out with her, Tanner needs to be putting his fist into my face."

"Already handled that," Tanner told him. "I made it clear that all the guys behind the chutes want to fuck her, so if you think being her friend will give you a chance, then great. If I think keeping her from having friends will keep me in her life, then that shit doesn't work."

"Really?" Ty asked.

Tanner pressed his lips together and nodded. "It's true too. I mean, all her friends are guys. How well do you think she'd take anyone telling her she can't talk to us?"

I chuckled. "She'd pretend like she didn't hear it and do her own damned thing."

"And Tanner should still be trying to beat my ass," Ty pointed out.

"Only if I want to get dumped," Tanner said. "Strong women aren't into that, Ty."

"Oh."

Ty sounded honestly surprised, but also willing to accept that. Still, I had a feeling there was more to this than he was saying.

"So how do you think that picking fights is going to explain you hanging out with her?" I asked.

Ty pulled off his hat, ducked his head, and scratched at the back of his neck. "Well, boyfriend, mentor, protector. I mean, if I'm protecting her, then that's a real good reason for me to be hovering."

"It is," Tanner agreed. "Also a real good reason to be trying to impress her. Does it make you feel better about this?"

"It also works with what you've been saying," I pointed out to Tanner.

He nodded, so Ty pushed his hat back onto his head and let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah?" he asked.

I just shrugged. “You think you need a reason to be around her. You don’t. If someone asks, you should just tell them to fuck off.”

“It’s more the not fucking everything else,” Ty muttered.

Ok, yeah, he had a bit of a point with that. “But if you think you’re setting yourself up,” Tanner said, “then fucking someone else is a real good way to get Cody to write you off.”

“Friend-zoned hard,” I said.

“Really?” Ty asked. “She’d still want to be friends with me?”

Which was when I realized this guy had no more of an idea how women worked than I did. Hell, I had a feeling Tanner wasn’t any better, and Cody sure as shit wasn’t. The four of us were a damned train wreck waiting to happen, but worth trying anyways. Sometimes, the things that were the most fun were the biggest wrecks in the end. My ride today was proof of that.

“Ok,” I decided, gesturing for them to head to the truck. “If those fuckers have questions, the answer is we’re all team Cody. We want to see a woman in the PBR, because where there’s one, there’s more.”

“And more media coverage,” Ty added. “That’s something I said to Derek and Casey this morning.”

Which was also a good point. “So we’re just looking out for our own interests?” Tanner asked. “Really?”

“Fuck that,” I grumbled, claiming the back seat as mine. “Naw. Cody’s the next best bull rider in the PBR. I’m in this for the fame. Tanner, you’re in this for the pussy. Ty’s in this because he’s trying real hard to move in when she gets tired of you. It’s what all the rest of those fuckers would do.”

“So why’s he not fucking the buckle bunnies again?” Tanner asked. “Because if he used to and Cody doesn’t hate him...”

“Not how girls work,” I pointed out. “Trust me, I got a little sister and I’ve heard all about this. Naw, if a guy’s into

ya, he doesn't stick his dick in anything else. Not if he's serious."

"So I'm serious?" Ty asked as he backed out of the parking space.

"Sure," I decided. "When someone wants to know why, just give them a look. They won't ask again."

"They'll assume he's fucked her," Tanner pointed out.

I thrust out both hands at Ty's side. "He has! They don't need to know a timeline! Shit. They also think Cody's some kind of fuckin' sex kitten who's downin' cock all the time."

"That's you," Ty joked.

"Fuck if I don't wish," I muttered. "Tanner's been too busy hookin' up with our girl, though."

Tanner just groaned, leaning back in his seat to pull his hat lower over his face. "I am not talking about that shit in front of him, J.D."

"I know how a blowjob works," Ty promised. "I mean, mine usually come with lipstick, but I bet Cody would loan J.D. some if you want."

I actually laughed at that. "Ain't happening, man. Ty's also cool, Tanner. It's that Canadian in him."

"Eh?" Ty said right on cue, flashing a grin at me through the rearview mirror. "I also know you two fuck," he went on. "Pretty sure J.D. is the bitch there too."

"He's really not," Tanner mumbled at the door.

Ty twisted to glance back at me quickly. "No?"

"He's got a threesome kink," I explained to Tanner. "So he's probably hopin' to get in on a little action."

"Through Cody, thank you very much," Ty clarified. "No offense, but both of ya have flat asses that aren't sexy."

"And dicks," I reminded him.

Ty shrugged at that. "Not gonna suck 'em, but also not scared of 'em. I got one of my own that I like a bit."

In the passenger seat, Tanner was scrubbing at his face, clearly embarrassed. “Right,” he said. “Yeah. So. All I want to know is if we’re still good after today, Ty. I mean, you were fucking pissed at me in the arena.”

“Looked good, though,” I pointed out. “Almost like you got the girl he wanted, and it wasn’t like *we* could hear shit.”

“I was dazed,” Ty admitted, sounding almost embarrassed about it. “One second I was on that bull, the next it was like the music had switched. I was trying to figure out why I was lying in the arena, and then I figured out everyone was watching - including the fuckers I’d just tried to make shut up about Cody.”

“Ah...” Tanner said. “Got on the bull pissed - “

“And hungover,” I added.

“And I didn’t eat shit all day,” Ty explained. “My head’s still pounding. Doc said I don’t have a concussion, but I’m gonna have to trash the helmet. It’s fucked. Means I got hit hard.”

“You did,” I assured him. “Horns, twice. Pumpkin Spice is a young bull, and I think that fucker’s starting to figure out how to dump us.”

“Here’s hoping I don’t pull him again.” He turned on his turn signal and eased over to hit the right exit. “Guys?”

“Yeah?” Tanner and I replied at the same time.

“Who’s spending the night with Cody tonight?”

“You,” I decided on the spot.

Tanner twisted to look at me. “Pretty sure it should be your turn.”

“And I’m good,” I promised. “Fuck, ain’t like I could do shit with her anyways, ‘cept talk. I’m gonna get my ass high, eat as much as I can handle, and then get higher.”

“I need some of that,” Tanner said.

But Ty was smiling at the road as he aimed for our hotel. “You two sure? I’m not trying to be a dick about all this. I

just...”

“Feel like you’re being pushed out,” Tanner realized. “You aren’t. Promise.”

Ty chuckled softly, then shook his head. “Ok, I think I like hanging out with the ‘gay’ guys.”

“Bi,” I clarified.

“Pan,” Tanner reminded him.

“You know what I mean,” Ty said. “It’s just that...” He got a look of concentration on his face even as he directed his truck to the parking space beside where Cody had put mine. When he put it in park, he didn’t immediately turn it off. Instead, he twisted in his seat to see us. “Look, the thing I did with Reni? It was a night. A hookup. We spit-roasted a girl, had a few laughs the next day, and that was it. This isn’t the same.”

“It’s not,” I agreed.

Ty just pulled in a breath and kept going. “And I don’t know how to explain that. I mean, shit. You two just laying all this out? No bullshit and all?”

“Not acting like dumb bull riders?” Tanner asked. “Yeah, I wanna. Fuck, it’d be a lot easier if I told ya to back off, I don’t give a shit, here’s the schedule, or whatever. Thing is, Cody’s not like that.” He glanced at me to make sure he wasn’t wrong, then back to Ty. “And the *one* thing I know about women is if this is gonna work, we can’t be freaked out about our feelings - or even that we have them.”

“Good point,” I admitted. “Because if we start fighting, I have a real funny feeling that Cody’s answer would be to blow us all off. She’s earned enough now to buy her own truck.”

“Shit,” Ty breathed.

I just nodded. “Yeah. She don’t need us, so if we wanna keep her around, we can’t be dumbasses.”

“Easier said than done,” Tanner said.

Again, I nodded. “Yeah, but we’re not fuckin’ it up yet. So, between the three of us, no shame, get me?”

“I’ll try,” Ty said, although he didn’t sound so sure about that.

Tanner simply bobbed his head in agreement. “I can do that. Probably not well, but I can at least try.”

Then Ty killed the truck and we all climbed out. I wasn’t quite sure what we’d figured out, but it felt good. It felt like we were a team. In my mind, I was callin’ us Team Cody.

CHAPTER 34



SINCE I HAD J.D.'s truck, I decided to stop at McDonald's when I saw one on the way back to the hotel. I also got some extra burgers for the guys. A lot of them. Probably too many, but we had microwaves in the room, and they'd work well enough.

Then I managed to not only get a long, hot shower to soak out my own muscles, but I also had time to dry my hair and pull on some soft pants. The whole time, my mind kept jumping back to Ty shoving people around tonight. First the guys he should've ignored, and then *Tanner!*

I wasn't sure what was going on, but I wouldn't be able to sleep until I knew. Between Ty's attitude lately and my scores dropping, my mind felt like it was spinning in circles. So, when I heard the guys laughing as they made their way up the hall, I hopped to my feet and gathered up the bags of burgers and fries. I wanted to tackle this head on.

"It's kinda cold, but I picked up food," I announced as J.D. sauntered into the room.

Tanner and Ty were right behind him, and all three guys' eyes lit up at the sight of those bags. Like rabid animals, they headed over. There was a moment of shuffling as they divided burgers, fries, and drink options.

Ty had a Big Mac in his mouth and three cheeseburgers balanced on his palm. J.D. was filling a bag with boxes of burgers, and Tanner was tasting fries. In the end, I was pretty sure they'd all shoved most of the food into their mouths

before they even finished sorting, but it was kinda cute. Unfortunately, I was going to ruin the whole thing because I simply couldn't let this go.

“Um, Ty?” I asked. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“All night,” J.D. replied. “Because I'm gonna eat, get high, eat some more, get more high, and then hope my aches shut up.”

“And sleep,” Tanner said as he picked up a bag. “Cody, you cool if I crash on this side tonight?”

“Uh, sure,” I decided. “Everything ok?”

“He got kicked,” Ty said. “Big ol' bruise on his back. Pretty sure he's wanting to smoke out with J.D.”

“Vape,” J.D. corrected.

“And yes,” Tanner said. “Sleep too. I didn't really do a whole lot of that last night.”

I caught his eyes and nodded. “Yeah. Relax. I think I'm the only one not hurting this time, but I get it.”

It took just a bit longer to get everything we needed from J.D.'s side over to Ty's. I made sure I had my gear bag for the morning. Ty grunted - because his mouth was full - and tipped his head at his in a silent request for help. Snagging that, I followed him through the dividing doors in the middle, then closed our side behind me. Then, once we were alone, I decided I might as well just get this over with.

“Why did you start shit with Eli, Derek, and Casey?” I asked as I sat down cross-legged on the closest bed.

“Mm?” Ty asked, grabbing another of the burgers and a box of fries. “You heard what they were saying!”

“Yeah,” I agreed, trying to keep this calm, “but you were about to ride, Ty.”

“And they weren't going to stop,” he pointed out as he dug into his second burger. “Cody, I know how guys like that are. They need someone to put them in their place, so I did.”

“That's not how it works,” I told him.

“Yes,” he assured me, “it is. They respect someone who can put them on the ground, and I promise I can. Shit, in the PBR, it’s about the only thing we respect.”

“And I can’t!” I snapped.

He paused, then finished chewing and swallowed. “Huh?”

“I can’t put them on the ground,” I clarified. “Never mind that you lost your focus and took a set of horns to the face for it! Ty, you were unconscious!”

“Not quite,” he said before shoving a collection of fries into his mouth.

I just sighed. “Ok, flat out, not moving, and making me think you’d just been killed before my eyes.” I lifted a brow to make the point.

He took another bite of the burger, then one more, and set the food on the nightstand. Then, he gave me his full attention.

“That bull tried to get me in the chute, Cody. It had nothing to do with Austin’s cronies, ok?”

Which meant he still wasn’t listening to me. Reaching up, I pinched the bridge of my nose, wishing I knew how to say this in a way that would make sense to him.

“Why’d you shove Tanner around?” I tried instead.

“Because he called sports med and I was fine,” he said. “I also didn’t know everyone thought I was out. I thought he was babying me because of this thing we’re doing, making me look like a pussy when those assholes needed to know I could put them in the dirt.”

Yeah, I was pretty sure there was some kind of logic there, but the way guys thought was stupid sometimes. More times than I wanted to admit, and this was one of them. Still, it didn’t fix the problem.

“Ty, you can’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Any of that!” I huffed. “Jump out of the chute to throw down with my bullies! Half-ass your ride. Pick a fight with my

boyfriend on live TV. All of it, Ty. You can't do that, because I can't handle it."

"I'm fine," he said quickly. "Cody, Doc checked me out. No concussion, nothing."

"Not that kind," I muttered, feeling a bit like an asshole now. "I mean, yeah, I was worried about that too, but you don't understand."

"You're right, I don't," he agreed. "You're fucking talking in circles, Cody. Just fucking say it, ok?"

Well, if that was what he wanted, then that was what I'd do. "You started shit with Eli, Derek, and Casey, and I'm the one who's going to pay for it," I said. "That crap with Tanner? You know what they'll say the next time I come off a bull? That Tanner's saving me, that I can't do it on my own, and shit like that. When you pick a fight with these guys, you think it's all about you, but this is *my* fight, and I can't finish it with my fists!"

"So I'll do it," he assured me. "See, I figured that out today. Tanner's your boyfriend. J.D. is your mentor. Me? I'm your protector."

"And you're doing a shit job of it."

"What?" He pushed to his feet. "I shut those fuckers up, and I did it for you, Cody."

"You made sure they'll just wait until you aren't around," I countered. "Trust me, I've been dealing with this shit for long enough. I know how bull riders work."

"Yeah, and that's what you said about me, but I'm on your side."

"Making a mess of it!" I tossed my hands up. "Jesus. Why is this so hard for you to understand?"

"Because the only way to stop a bully is to make sure they know you'll fight back," he told me as he paced to the end of the bed. "C'mon, we all learned this in grade school. When they try to beat you up, hit them back and they'll pick on someone easier."

“I’m the someone easier!” I yelled at him. “What part of that don’t you get?”

He paused. Slowly, he looked back. “What?”

“You’re gonna protect me, right? Gonna throw down?” I scoffed. “Well, what happens when you aren’t around? If you get the punches flying, then I’m fucked, Ty. That shit they’re saying? Let them! Ignore them. If they don’t get a rise out of you, they’ll give up.”

He blinked a few times, then slowly shook his head. “I’m not going to let them hurt you.”

“So you’ll egg them on instead?” I asked. “Ty, they’re idiots. I’ve heard worse back home. Shit, why the hell do you think I want out of Missouri so bad? I know how this goes. Unlike you, I’ve been dealing with it for my entire fucking life, and this? It’s not fucking helping!”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“No!” I insisted. “You’re proving their point. The girl can’t do it on her own. I can’t hack the PBR’s Tough Enough series because I’m not tough enough. I need a guy to do it for me.”

“And when they do try to beat you down?” he roared. “You think I’m going to just stand there and let it happen? Not fucking likely, Cody.”

“No...” I groaned. “No, Ty. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what the fuck are you saying, because to me it sounds like you’re pissed because I stood up for you. You’re being a bitch because I treated talking shit about you the same way I would’ve someone talking shit about Renato. What the fuck do you want from me?”

“I want you to ignore it when they say I can’t because I’m a girl!” I shot back, matching his volume. “Because I’m here to prove it. It doesn’t matter what I say. It doesn’t matter what they say. It matters what I *do*, and I’m right here, proving it. Don’t you fucking see that?!”

“Oh.”

At some point in there, I'd uncrossed my legs and was just about to stand up to match him, but his answer made everything stop. It was as if the steam had just been let out of the room, and for a moment, the pair of us stared at each other in confusion.

"Oh?" I asked carefully.

Ty made his way back to the other bed and sat down across from me. "Look, I've seen the shit these guys do to each other on tour, and I don't want that to happen to you. Shit, look at J.D.'s rope."

"Yeah, but that's not what I'm talking about," I assured him.

"So what part are you talking about?" he asked.

"Them calling me a slut," I clarified. "Them saying I'm gonna break, get bucked off, have 'easy mode,' or that I'm fucking everyone."

"And bulls." He growled in the back of his throat.

"It's just bullshit," I told him. "It's meant to get a reaction, and if they decide giving me shit gets me going, you going, and J.D. going? Why would they stop, Ty? Why? The taunts make us distracted, and you just proved what happens when you're distracted."

"I did?"

I thrust both hands at him. "You were knocked out!"

"Well, but - "

"No!" I snapped, cutting him off. "You jumped out of the chute to shove them around, got on, didn't set up again, and called for the chute to open before you were ready. You were fucking *distracted*," I told him, "Because the real Ty McBride rides a hell of a lot better than that."

So he leaned over and scrubbed at his face with both hands. "Then how the hell am I supposed to be your protector, hm?"

"You don't have to protect me," I tried to say.

He just looked up, his brown eyes so tired. “Yeah, Cody, I do. Look, there’s no other reason for me to be following you around. Just... I can do this.”

“Ok,” I relented. “But can you do it without smothering me or making me look helpless?”

“I dunno, can I?”

“You did this morning,” I admitted. “I mean, yanking my rope out of Derek’s hand like that? That was perfect.”

Finally, a tiny little smile touched his lips. “Ok. And I can make sure your gear is safe and help you in the chute, right?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

He nodded. “So, I just have to ignore what they say?”

“Please?” I begged. “Ty, you don’t understand. I am weak. I am a girl. I am different from anything they’ve seen before. Not because I want to be, but I am, and it feels like that’s all people want to focus on. It’ll get old fast, though.”

“I’m not sure you’ll ever get old,” he told me.

This time, I was the one smiling, because I knew he meant that as a compliment. “Yeah, but pointing out I’m a girl won’t be news.”

He nodded. “Ok. I’ll let you decide when I should beat their asses, how’s that? I mean, unless they’re trying to actually hurt you, then all bets are off.”

I leaned over to grab his hand. “Thank you. Ty, that’s all I wanted, because seeing you lying on the dirt like that? I honestly thought it was my fault.”

“That I was a dumb ass?” he asked.

“For me,” I clarified. “Those guys were picking on me and you got distracted. Dad always said that’s the fastest way for a bull rider to get dead. If I let it get to me - or you let it get to you - then the bull will be the only one winning.”

He wrapped both of his hands around mine. “Baby, I’m fine. I just hate that they can’t see how good you are. I’m

scared that if I'm not watching, they're going to do something. I'm not going to let them chase you off."

"Yeah, but..." I tried.

"But," he broke in, "I will let you handle the words. I'm still going to protect you. Can we at least agree on that?"

"Yeah," I said softly. "I think we can."

CHAPTER 35



TY GAVE MY HAND A TUG, encouraging me to leave my bed and cross the gap to where he was sitting. It was enough. I took one step, then tucked a knee up beside his leg before moving to straddle his hips. Immediately, his arms wrapped around my back.

“Hey,” he said softly, “I’m sorry. I honestly thought I was taking care of you.”

“But I don’t need to be taken care of,” I reminded him. “Ty, I’ve been doing this on my own for a long time. Maybe not in the Tough Enough series, but it’s all the same shit.”

“Yeah...” he mumbled, letting his hands slide slowly up my spine, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to make it easier for you.”

“Yeah?” I asked, because that was honestly kinda sweet.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Cody, I don’t want to protect you because I think you’re helpless. I want to kick the shit out of those assholes because you’re my girl. Well, and Tanner’s, and J.D.’s. I don’t like someone fucking with you when I could do something about it.”

“I know,” I admitted. “It’s just that I have all the sponsors watching me, and it feels like everyone’s keeping track of what I’m doing. If it gets out that I have a team of men running around to handle my life so I can keep it together long enough to ride a bull?” I grimaced. “That makes me look weak, Ty. It makes me look like I can’t do this.”

“This?” he asked, pulling me just a little closer.

I didn't try to resist. "The Tough Enough series. The toughest sport on dirt. It's not just about riding the bulls, but surviving them, and if I can't take a few mean words, then how will I survive a set of horns or hooves?"

He leaned forward, pressing his brow to mine. "Ok." He still didn't sound happy about it. "But don't you get that I just want to be your Superman?"

Yeah, now that was cute. It also wasn't something I was used to. Part of me didn't want to discourage him, but the other half didn't want to be smothered. I thought for a second before answering, hoping I wasn't screwing this up.

"You already are," I assured him. "Ty, when you helped me in Tulsa? I'm never going to forget that, ok? You're the whole reason I'm here now."

"Yeah?" he asked.

I nodded, my head brushing against his. "But I'm not here to make you feel good. I mean, that sounds so bad, but it's just that I have to get these sponsors."

"I'll cover it," he insisted, pulling back to see my face. "Cody, that's what I'm trying to tell you. Fuck the sponsors if they don't like you. We'll make sure you can keep going."

"No," I insisted. "Ty, I don't want you paying my way, covering all my expenses, and that shit. All that does is make me into your toy. I am doing this because I want to *do this*. I want to earn respect, make my rides, and pay my own bills. I mean, what happens if you get killed?"

"Shit," he grumbled, making it clear he thought that couldn't happen.

But it could. We all knew it could. "Just listen," I begged. "If you get killed out there and I don't have sponsors? Now, I'm not talking about how upset I'd be. Just the facts, ok? Like, if you're paying my way, and you suddenly vanished, then where does that leave me? Up shit creek, right?"

"Oh," he mumbled.

I nodded, taking the advantage while I had it. “And I know you think you’re being sweet - and you are - but it’s not going to help me. Ty, I need to focus. I need to sell myself so I can get sponsors so I can get a paycheck. I need to catch up to you and J.D., and I’m just a brand-new rookie, so let me have the space to do that?”

He nodded. “Ok,” he relented. “But I’m still going to make sure no one fucks with you. Like a bodyguard, Cody. I mean, we guys talked about it, and it makes sense. Well, to the other guys, it will. If Austin’s fucking with you, and we’re all watching out for you? Yeah. This isn’t something I’m going to back down on. I’m sorry, baby, but I can’t.”

This time, I was the one giving in. “Ok,” I agreed. “Just no distracting me from my job, right?”

So his hands slid down to my ass. “Ever?” And a little smile curled his lips.

I shifted a little closer. “Well, not at the events. But I guess this means no bar tonight?”

“Not allowed to drink with the shot Doc gave me,” he admitted. “J.D. and Tanner are too high to move by now.” His smile grew a little more. “And you’re still in fifth place, you know.”

“While you got a no score,” I reminded him.

He just leaned in and kissed me quickly. “Don’t even care. I have a hot little bull rider on my lap, and...” He bucked his hips up, making me very aware of the hard ridge. “I’ve finally figured out how I can still be around you at the arena. I was starting to think I was getting pushed out, but I’m not. We really can make all this work, and ain’t no one going to think anything of us being friends.”

“Good friends,” I promised, leaning in to kiss him again.

Because Ty was sexy. He was amazing. His arms were around my back, and he was acting like he felt just fine. More than fine, because that ridge between us felt really good pressing against the junction of my legs. To prove the point, I rolled my hips across him.

“Tease,” he growled before stealing my lips one more time.

“Nuh-unh,” I promised before kissing him even deeper.

His tongue met mine, bumping against it before swirling around, and his hands were moving. I felt the hem of my shirt shift, his palms caressed the skin at my waist, and then he lifted them higher, pushing fabric upwards. I refused to give up his mouth, though, kissing him until I felt my shirt catch in my armpits. Only then did I pull away to duck out of it.

Ty immediately reached for the clasp of my bra. “Tell me I’m not moving too fast again?” he begged.

“Not this time,” I assured him as I tugged at his shirt.

Our mouths connected again, but I was going to get him at least half naked. I felt it when my bra released and shrugged out of it, yanking at his shirt at the same time. Ty had to help, but when he threw his shirt away, his hands caught my hips again.

Then he stood.

I squeaked, grabbing his neck when he lifted me with him. My legs clung to his sides, but Ty was a man on a mission. Holding me like that, he crossed the room to the table, then deposited my rump right onto it. Something poked me in the back so I pushed at it, hearing one of our bags fall to the floor with a clatter of spurs. Before me, Ty was working off his boots, using the other foot to help.

“I have to share you with those two,” he said, his voice deep and heavy, “so I’m going to make damned sure you have a reason to keep coming back.”

Then he caught the back of my neck and kissed me so hard. My hands went to his chest, feeling all those muscles flexing as he leaned in to explore my mouth. I loved it. This was the kind of wild passion I chased riding bulls. It was the exhilaration I longed for. That it was Ty only made it better.

He was still working off his own clothes, but I didn’t care about that. I pulled my lips from his to kiss my way down his neck. I allowed my palms to slide across his pecs and biceps.

My best friend always said I deserved to take what I wanted, so I decided I finally would. This man had always been my personal fantasy. Never in a million years would I have guessed he'd want me back, but this was real.

This thing between us was crazy and made no sense, but it was definitely real, and I wanted all of it. When his mouth moved to suck my breast, I arched into it, making it easier. Holding on to his arm, I felt his bicep tense as he got his own pants open, but when he pulled away to strip them off, I was feeling just a little overdressed. It didn't last long.

Ty barely had himself naked before he hooked his fingers in my waistband, catching both my pants and panties. Then he pulled. I had to brace myself on the table and lift my ass, but the growl he made was sexier than I'd expected. He was a little wild with desire. The part I couldn't get enough of was that his desire was for *me*!

Until he pulled away.

For a moment, I was sitting there with my bare ass on the table, completely confused, but Ty knelt, I heard spurs clank again, and realized he was looking for his bag. Two seconds later, he stood back up with a condom wrapper between his teeth, tearing it open like he was almost frantic.

"Lean back," he told me as he focused on rolling the condom on.

Confused, I rested my hands behind my ass and tried. Ty glanced up with those pretty brown eyes of his, and then leaned in. It wasn't his hips that aimed for my pussy. No, it was his mouth. One hand pushed my legs wider apart, and then I felt nothing but heat.

He licked. He sucked. His tongue worked me in ways I had never imagined, teasing all of me. I wanted to grab for him, but when I tried, I felt the table shift like it might tip over, so I pressed my hands even further back and just took as he proved he knew exactly what he was doing.

When he found my clit, I stopped caring about anything else. There was a moan. It was mine. I wanted to buck into his

face but couldn't. Like this, all I could do was take, and I decided I deserved it, so I hooked a leg over his shoulder and let him have his way with me.

Ty groaned in approval, and then I felt his hand. Pushing two fingers into my body, his other hand held me right where he wanted, and he devoured me. Sparks shot up my spine, made of pure pleasure. His fingers curled, driving me even higher.

"That's my girl," he said, doing it again. "Fucking take what you want, baby."

And then he doubled down. I couldn't give anything back, not perched here like this, so I obeyed and simply let him devour me. His hand moved faster. His mouth sucked at my clit a little harder. His tongue swirled, and before I knew it, I was whimpering. Maybe J.D. and Tanner could hear me. Possibly whoever was on the other side could as well. None of it fucking mattered, because this was amazing.

My orgasm hit as hard as a bull coming out of a chute. Clenching that leg on his back, I had just enough purchase to hold myself in place, but my body shuddered, wracked with the intensity of this man's attention, and he didn't stop until the last wave of pleasure had passed.

Then he pulled back enough to ease my leg from his shoulder and around his waist. "Oh, we are not done," he promised.

He pulled my hips to the very edge of the table and sheathed himself in my body in a single thrust. I gasped, my back arching with the surprise, but that felt so fucking good!

"Ty!" I gasped.

"Gotta lean back," he reminded me. "Otherwise you're gonna fall off that table."

And while he was right, it wasn't easy. I wanted to hold him, to pull at him, or something. My fingers longed to feel his flesh, but the sight of him was almost as good. Slowly, he slid out, lined himself up again, and pushed back in easily. Every

inch was on display for me, and he repeated that a few times before his hands moved to cup both of my breasts.

“I’m gonna make you feel so good,” he promised as his thumbs teased my nipples.

And he thrust again, filling me completely. From there, it was on. Ty knew I didn’t need to be treated gently, so he didn’t. No, he pumped into me nice and hard, and while I leaned back, he toyed with every inch of my body, kissing, touching, and fucking me in ways I didn’t know were possible.

My eyes wanted to close with the intensity of sensation. My breath was coming hard and fast. I felt like a princess on a pedestal, being worshiped by her man, and I loved it. Every caress felt so good, but something about the way he was treating me was even better.

Because this wasn’t about him getting off. This was Ty trying to make it clear he was here for me. He was mine - all mine - and I was taking. Things between us didn’t have to be easy. They were intense. They were crazy. We were bull riders, so that made it ok, because he got me the same way I got him.

And he made sure I felt so damned good that nothing else mattered. Not my scores, not the sponsors, and not even the assholes trying to shame me off the circuit. This, right here, was all I could think about, and the sight of this beautiful, sexy, and amazing man giving himself to me was a fantasy come true.

The table was creaking in protest with each thrust. Our breaths were loud in the room. I could see his chest getting slick, but I refused to look away. The pleasure was growing inside me, and so close. His hands played with my breasts. His hips rolled, driving him against that sweet spot inside me until I couldn’t take anymore.

Locking my legs around his waist, I came, throwing my head back as I sucked in a breath, struggling not to be too loud. Ty kept going, his hands leaving my breasts to catch my hips, and he rode me through it, higher, then higher still, until I was sure I would never feel anything this good again. And

then he groaned, collapsing forward so both of us were balanced in the center of the table.

We panted, struggling to catch our breath, but my eyes were open and holding his. Neither of us could find words, but something in his gaze said enough. This was more than a fuck. So much more. It meant something, and yet I was too scared to even think of the words that might fit. Words I was not ready to use. Words I was scared to even get close to.

“Hey,” he finally breathed. “Grab my shoulders, Cody. It’s a long way to the bed.”

I nodded and obeyed. He slid from my body, but didn’t pull away. Instead, he lifted, carrying me around his waist over to the bed where he eased me down.

“Crawl in there,” he told me before turning for the bathroom.

I did, pulling back the blankets for both of us, but my mind was still stuck on that look. I liked this guy. Shit, I liked him a lot. Even after me bitching him out, he’d still looked at me like that? So when Ty came back and crawled in beside me, I immediately curled up against his side.

“Ty?” I asked.

“Mm?”

“Thank you for being my protector and not giving up on me.”

He turned out the light and then pulled me even closer. “The only thing I ever wanted this bad was bull riding, Cody. So no, I’m not giving up on any of it. Not ever.”

CHAPTER 36



I HEARD the yelling coming from Ty's room that night. Cody sounded like she wasn't going to back down, so I sat my ass on the bed and hit my vape a few times. Tanner joined me, neither of us saying a thing so we could listen in. Maybe that was wrong of us, but this wasn't their first fight.

Ty had his head so far up his ass when it came to that girl, but I couldn't really blame him. He thought he knew what was best for her. Instead of listening to what she wanted, he ran off on his own and tried to give her what he thought she should have. Too bad for him, Cody wasn't like most of the women he'd known. Nope, she was the real kind, not some idiot putting on an act to make him happy.

I chuckled at that. Yeah, I'd figured out that the women most of us met at the bars were using us. I also didn't blame them. They saw something they liked, so they did the exact same thing every one of these bull riders did. They played the game, being the perfect delicate girl to make him feel big and tough. Then she got fucked the way she wanted. So did he. In my book, that was called a win-win.

But when the sounds changed from words to moans, I decided to call it a night. After a long, hot shower with a damned good-looking man beside me, I managed to limp my way back to the bed and drop into it the right way. My head was floating, though, and all my pain felt like it was hanging on someone else.

"Hey," Tanner said as he crawled in beside me.

I turned to him with a stoned smile. “Hey.”

That made him chuckle. I knew he was feeling pretty good, but he hadn’t vaped even half as much as I had.

“If you had to pick one of us,” he said, “which would it be? Cody or me?”

“Naw,” I grumbled. “That’s like a trick question.”

“Just trying to figure out what this shit is we’re doing,” he clarified. “Seriously, J.D. Which one of us? You more into women, or what?”

“I dunno,” I mumbled, turning to face him. “I like what I like.”

“But which one?” he pressed. “You’d pick her, wouldn’t ya?”

I was just high enough that the answer fell out before I could stop it. “Yeah.”

He nodded, but the crazy thing was that he didn’t look upset. “Kinda what I figured. You’re that into her, but you keep backing off.”

“What about you?” I asked, deciding to even this up.

Tanner tried to blow that off. “Fuck, not even the same.”

“Sure it is. Which one?”

He shrugged. “I’m pretty sure I couldn’t pick. I also haven’t dated a girl in a real long time.”

“Oh, so you like men better?” I caught his side and tugged, encouraging him to come closer. “That’s kinda sexy.”

“I’ve been with more guys,” he clarified. “Not necessarily a like thing. More of an opportunity thing. J.D., no one recognizes my face. I can hit a gay bar and not become a spectacle. Hooking up with a girl? I promise most of them have no interest in the Red Bull RV - or my roommates.”

“There’s that,” I conceded. “Wait, why?”

“Why what?”

“Are we talking about this,” I said, proving just how high I was. “And why aren’t you pissed at me?”

“Because I don’t have a fucking clue how to be a boyfriend,” Tanner explained. “To anyone. I’m just kinda hoping you’ll help me out the way you are with Ty. I know you’re all about Cody. I like that you’ll fess up to it. Makes me think I might have a chance at becoming even with her one day.”

So I closed my eyes and felt my lips curling into a smile. “Yeah, Tanner. I just get her. She gets me. You? I think you’re hot, but you don’t let no one see what’s deep inside. Not yet.”

“I’m working on it,” he said softly as he ran his fingers through my hair. “Go to sleep, J.D. That bull hit you hard. I think you deserve it.”

“Mhm…” I agreed, and that was the last thing I remembered.

Until I woke up the next morning to my alarm screaming that it was gonna be an early start. Sundays always were. Sundays in Cheyenne were worse. Unfortunately, my high didn’t last all night. The aches were back, the sound coming out of my phone was fucking loud, and I was moving real damned slow.

Then the flash of a bare ass proved Tanner was already out of bed and taking care of it. The sound stopped, and the view was amazing. He turned back to see me watching and smiled. His dick was half hard. His thighs were the kind I could get a real good grip on. His chest? Damn. That sweet Midwestern boy looked like candy when he was naked.

“Get up,” Tanner told me.

I just glanced down. “Am. Kinda the problem.”

Which earned me a laugh. “Just tell me you don’t get high before you ride?”

I shook my head and pointed at my main bag. “Naw, but in there’s some pills.”

“What kind of pills?” Tanner asked warily even as he headed that way.

“Aleve? Advil? Tylenol? I dunno. Can’t tell that shit apart. It’s the one Doc said would help best.” When he found the bottle, I held up my hands for him to toss it over. The bottle hit my palms, and I immediately started working open the lid. “I won’t take shit to fuck with my head before strapping onto a bull,” I assured him.

“Good,” he said. “I’m also pretty sure those two are still out.”

So I swallowed a few of my pills, pulled myself out of bed, and decided to do something about that. First, I had to get dressed, but that gave enough time for my shit to start working. The medication kind. Well, and my brain.

“You cool drivin’ my truck?” I asked Tanner as I shoved my feet into my boots.

“Yep,” he assured me, pausing on his way to the bathroom. “Why?”

I flashed him a grin. “Because I’m gonna wake them up, and I think you get to take the girl today.”

“Oh, I’m definitely ok with that,” Tanner promised.

I nodded, heading towards the dividing door, but paused. “Oh, and yeah, I’ll help ya with her. I figure she needs to be shown that she deserves all of this, so I got your back.”

He poked his head out of the bathroom. “And this thing we’re doing?”

I shrugged. “I ain’t so good with that, but I’m willing to fumble around a bit.”

The smile he gave me! Yep, clearly that was the right answer. Tanner nodded, then vanished again. I could hear the sink, so he was probably brushing his teeth. I needed to do that too, plus a shit-ton of other stuff, but Cody needed time to get all pretty. So, easing open the door to the other room, I checked to see how things were going.

Cody lay half over Ty's chest. The blankets were low enough for me to be sure they were both naked. A glance showed their bags tossed on the floor by the table, but the top of it was empty. I chuckled, knowing what it looked like when someone swept a surface clear in a hurry. Evidently my girl had a good time last night.

"Cody," I whispered, making my way over to the bed.

She mumbled, but the kind that told me to leave her alone. Not happening. A few more steps and I was close enough to rub her arm.

"Cody," I said again.

She cracked open her eyes, smiled, and then realized where she was and what was happening. With a gasp, she quickly jumped back, scrambling to pull the blankets up over her chest - and poor Ty took the brunt of it all.

He let out a grunt as she pushed off him, jerked awake, and his head whipped from side to side as he tried to figure out what was happening. Struggling not to laugh, I just lifted my hands and backed away.

"Sundays in Cheyenne start early," I reminded them.

"Fuck," Ty groaned. "I forgot to set an alarm."

"I got your back," I promised before heading back to the dividing door. "Oh, and Ty?"

"What?" he grumbled.

"You cool with giving me a ride to the arena?"

"What about your truck?" Cody asked.

"Tanner's taking you in it," I assured her. "My way of paying him back for savin' my life, or something."

"Yeah," Ty grumbled. "I'll give you a ride. Let the happy couple be a happy couple."

"And make sure the right things are seen," I agreed. "This morning is going to be fucking stupid."

An hour later, Ty and I headed down together, leaving the “couple” behind to settle their own shit. Ty was moving pretty good, but damned if I didn’t still hurt a bit more than I liked. If I ever wanted the chance to toss that pretty little blonde in bed, I was gonna need to stay *on* the bulls today, not under them.

We were both playing it cool - just a pair of riders heading through the hotel - up until we were safely in his truck. Then, while he let the glow plugs warm up, Ty decided to prove he’d been listening to us at least a little bit.

“So how are things going with Tanner?” he asked.

That was not a typical guy question. He should’ve asked if I got fucked or sucked. That? It sounded like the sort of thing Cody would ask, being all worried about my feelings and insecurities or something.

“Good...” I tried.

He huffed out a laugh. “C’mon, man. You caught me asleep with Cody lying across me naked. I’m trying to act like this is chill.”

Ok, that was better. “Honest truth?” I offered. “Fuck if I know.”

“That doesn’t sound good. So, like, it’s all physical?”

I sent Ty a confused look, but subtly. Had he just put me in the guy version of the friend zone? The space where a man didn’t have to worry about his balls falling off if he worried about his friend? Then again, if he had, that meant Ty honestly considered me a Friend, and the capital letter kind. The sort who’d drop everything for him. I kinda liked the idea of that.

“Don’t want it to be,” I admitted. “Just not the same with guys.”

He started the truck. “How so?”

“He’s a guy.” That should’ve been clear enough. “What the fuck do I say to him? He’s hot? Yeah, that’s for fuckin’. He’s cool? That don’t sound like what I want.”

“Yeah,” Ty agreed. “Girls just talk about things.”

“And we talk to girls about things,” I agreed. “It’s easier.”

“No shit.” He laughed once. “Girls don’t get worried about looking like pussies. I mean, Cody was telling me about those guys talking shit, and it doesn’t bother her at all. Well, not like it bothers me.”

“Bothers her different,” I explained.

He murmured in agreement. “But that’s my point. It’s like girls have this extra sense. They know how to figure out what’s bullshit, what’s a blow-off, and what’s a sore spot. And when they let you in? Damn.” His lips curled into a soft smile. “I just wanna make sure no one hurts her, you know? Think it’s the same with a guy?”

“Pretty sure it’s not,” I admitted. “Tanner don’t want me to act like he’s some fuck-up who can’t handle his own shit. He don’t need to be protected. Fuck, if you think about it, that’s his damned job: keeping all of *our* dumb asses safe.”

“But being protected isn’t just about throwing punches,” Ty told me. “It’s watching over him to know when he needs an excuse because he’s hurting. Letting yourself look like the asshole so he can get out of shit. I mean, that’s kinda what I’m wanting to do for Cody. If she can’t say no, then I can say no for her. Let them say I’m a dick so they stop calling her names and shit.”

Which was a damned good point, ‘cept for one problem. “Tanner’s got Isaac and Jorge.”

“Fuck, right,” Ty agreed. “But you, I dunno, like him like that?” He glanced over.

I grunted. “Think so. He’s real nice, just like Cody. He’s also real tough too.”

“Just like Cody,” Ty agreed. “Yeah, and he’s cooler than I thought.” He nodded at the road before him. “Just let me know if I can help. I mean, figure I owe ya a few, and I don’t forget when a friend does me a favor. You know, like you did sending me to St. Louis.”

I just nodded. “Yeah. Thanks, bro.”

Because that was the best word I had for this thing we were doing. Friends didn't feel like enough. Ty was quickly working his way up to bro, and not the smart-ass kind neither. I was going to let that be enough to carry me through the mess I knew I was going to find at the arena.

CHAPTER 37



NO ONE TOLD me about the autographs. Evidently, it was such a normal thing that the guys just accepted it, but since I'd never been to Cheyenne before - as a rider or a fan - I had no idea. At least not until Tanner pulled his truck into the arena's parking lot and I saw the setup out front.

This must've been what J.D. had been talking about when he said Sundays in Cheyenne started early, but what the hell? Confused, I looked over at Tanner, hoping he'd have a little insight. He saw, gave me a confused look, and kept going around to the back where we normally parked.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"Cheyenne," Tanner told me, as if that was an explanation. "Some radio station does a big thing every year. I dunno. I guess it's like a meet and greet for the fans? Thankfully, I don't have to mess with it."

"Oh."

But I still had to draw my bull, so I headed inside to handle that. Tanner and I split at the line for checking in. He had to go get ready for his part in this mess, and I had this. Still, the feel was very different, and I had no idea what I should really be doing.

So, I did what I always did. After heading to the spot where I'd set up my gear yesterday, I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Ty, then a second to J.D. Needless to say, it didn't take long before those boys converged on me, both hanging against the panel with shit-eating grins on their faces.

“What do ya mean you don’t know about Cheyenne Fan Time?” J.D. asked.

I gave him a dirty look. “Did you tell me about it?”

“Ty’s job,” J.D. said, getting himself out of trouble. “I mean, he’s the one who’s been showing you the ropes. I’m just your mentor.”

“Thanks,” Ty grumbled, but the laugh in the middle ruined his best attempt to sound grumpy. “Cody, it’s just a chance for fans to get pictures, signatures, and all that. Because of the way this place is set up - “

“And Sundays always sell the least tickets,” J.D. added.

“Yeah,” Ty agreed. “Well, they do a big push to get people out here. Not all have seats, but we’re expected to sign some posters, shake some hands, and all that stuff.”

I nodded slowly, taking it in. “Ok. Guys, you know I’ve never done anything like this, right?”

“Easy stuff,” J.D. assured me. “Put on your gear - except the vest. Too hot for that. When someone shoves a poster in your face, scrawl your name on it. If they want a pic, smile like you’re having fun.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be right there with you,” Ty assured me.

So I pulled out my chaps and strapped those on. I left off my spurs, because those were a pain in the ass to walk around in. My rhinestone belt was a little worse for wear, but without my protective vest to cover up half of it, I was pretty sure I was making the impression I wanted. Then, shoving my hat onto my head again, I was as ready as I would ever get.

The guys showed me the shortcut through the halls to an exit at the side where Sharpie markers were provided for the taking. That put us right in the middle of the insanity. At least a hundred people - and who knew how many more - were wandering around. Booths had been placed all over, offering the typical PBR memorabilia. Shirts, hats, posters, cups, and more were offered for sale.

Some were for the entire circuit, but plenty of things were centered on a specific rider. When I saw a black shirt with pink on it, I was surprised, because that was for me! It was just a line drawing of a rider on a bull with some color splashed across it, but I was impressed that the rider was an actual woman. Made me feel like I was coming up in the world. Unfortunately, there wasn't a long line at that booth like there was at most of the others.

Then we waded in. Within seconds, J.D. was pulled away by a group of girls squealing for him to sign their shirts - the ones they were wearing. His smile was a little lecherous, but that was exactly what I'd expected of him when we'd first met. Now, I knew it was just him being a shit and playing his part.

For the most part, the crowd didn't seem to care who they were walking past. It felt like a carnival of sorts. People were laughing. Food was the handheld kind. Everyone had on a cowboy hat. The only thing that set us bull riders apart from the general populous were our chaps. They made a couple of people look over, and a few guys smiled at me the way J.D. had those girls.

Immediately, Ty put himself between me and them, playing the bodyguard. He wasn't hanging on me, but he was hovering, and definitely aware of anyone who looked in my direction. Since I had no clue what was going on, I decided it had to be ok. Besides, he could see over most people's heads, whereas I couldn't.

In the distance, music was playing. Country, of course. A man's voice broke in every so often, and while I couldn't make out what he was saying, it sounded like the typical stuff for an event: buy this, look for that, or enter to win something. With the hum of excited conversation all around us, making out any one thing was basically impossible.

"Where are we going?" I asked Ty, since he seemed to be leading me somewhere.

"My booth always ends up over this way," he explained.

I just nodded, but my head was on a swivel. A little part of me hoped someone would stop us for an autograph. How cool would that be? When I saw Jake Cunningham surrounded by a group of guys, I may have been a little jealous, but I knew I'd get there. Right now, I was a nobody. Soon, I'd be a top rider.

Then the first fan hit. "Ty McBride!" A guy pushed his way closer, holding out a poster. "Man, you're my favorite!" Then his eyes landed on me. "Girlfriend?"

"Competition," Ty corrected as he quickly scrawled his name across the side of the poster.

Then he turned me away before that fan could say anything else. I'd intended to tell the guy who I was, but Ty hadn't given me the chance. Well, he knew what was going on here more than me, right? So maybe I'd missed something?

"You know," Ty said as we kept walking, "I think I can handle this protector gig."

Oh, so that was why he'd hurried me away. I tried to give him a smile, but it was a little weak. If this was a chance to get fans, then I wanted to use it to my benefit. After all, the more people cheering for me, the more likely the sponsors would be to slap their labels on my vest, right?

"But Ty," I said, "I need to get my name out there too."

"It's not that big of a deal," he assured me. "Half these people don't know who any of us are. They just want to check out your tits." And he leaned a little closer to my ear. "Which look real nice in that shirt."

I rolled my eyes. "Same shirt I wear every weekend."

"Trust me," he promised, "I know. I also can't stop thinking about that table."

The one he'd fucked me on. Yeah, that earned him a real smile, but we couldn't say much with the crowd packed around us. J.D. was long gone, but over there was Wes, one of the lower-ranking riders. When I saw that even he had a collection of people around him, I started to think I was doing this all wrong.

Then a girl pointed at me and squealed, yanking at the arm of the guy beside her. For a split second, I was sure I'd been recognized, but Ty shifted to that side, giving the cowboy a glare that was threatening enough for the fan to pull his girl in the opposite direction.

“What are you doing?” I snapped.

“You know these guys are thinking the wrong thing,” he explained.

I huffed. “Why, because you do?”

I turned away, intending to put a little space between us, but Ty caught up in only a few steps. When he grabbed my arm and yanked me to a halt, I had to clench my jaw to keep from screaming at him.

“How the fuck am I supposed to keep hands off you if I'm not at your side?” he demanded.

“I don't need you to do that,” I insisted. “Fan event, right?” I asked, gesturing around us. “Let me have a few fans, Ty. One or two!”

“Shit, like I have any either,” he grumbled. “Cody, relax. This is just bullshit. What matters is the event in a couple of hours.”

Maybe to him, but with my scores going down, I didn't want to take any chances. Sure, Max said he'd handle the sponsors, but I had to do my part too. I needed to be a 'real' bull rider, not some sideshow - which was what Ty was treating me like right now. The worst part was that he didn't even realize it. He seemed to honestly think he was helping!

I was seething when I heard someone call my name. “Cody!” The voice belonged to a woman.

I turned. Ty did the same a second later, and I saw the smile taking over his face. Heading towards me was a woman in jeans that were just a little too tight. Her shirt was the nice kind, not a t-shirt like everyone else here was wearing. That her eyes were on me and her smile seemed to be the real kind had me smiling back.

“Hi,” I said politely, not knowing a better way to greet her.

She held out a rolled-up poster. “Let me get your signature in the bottom corner of that?”

“Sure,” I agreed, pulling out my marker to scribble my name in the first spot I got unrolled.

It wasn't easy, since I had nothing to write on, but I managed. I was also pretty sure I'd seen this lady somewhere before. It wasn't until I passed the poster back that I figured it out.

“Are you with one of the sponsors?” I asked. “I'm pretty sure we've met.”

“Grace with Under Armour,” she admitted, offering a hand.

I took it, clasping her palm before letting go. “I didn't expect you to be in the middle of this mess. Working or pleasure?”

She laughed, but the scream of women made us both look over quickly. Nope, that wasn't an accident or a tragedy. It was an entire herd of cowgirls, and it seemed they'd all spotted Ty. The pitch was from their excitement.

“Ty McBride!” the boldest shouted as she ran straight towards us.

The rest of her cohort followed. I could hear them talking about pictures, autographs, and more. Reaching up, I gave Ty a push, making it clear he should go deal with that. He glanced back, looking like he wanted to refuse, so I tipped my head at Grace and gave him a pointed look. That seemed to be enough. Then I gestured to the side, inviting Grace to step away from the estrogen overload with me.

“Wow,” Grace laughed. “Is that normal?”

“For Ty, yeah,” I assured her. “He's the playboy of the PBR.”

“Boyfriend?” she asked slyly.

I shook my head. “I'm with Tanner.”

Grace gave me an apologetic look, both of us still walking away from the thickest part of the crowd. “Forgive me, Cody. I think bull riding is interesting, but the truth is that I’m from corporate. I’m here the whole weekend, and I’m allowed to have fun, but I’m more of a tourist than a true fan. Which one is Tanner?”

“The bullfighter in purple,” I explained. “Some people call them clowns, but the only clown in the PBR is Cletus.”

“Ah,” she said, catching back up. “And that was the kiss at the awards, right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I assured her.

“But you made it clear you didn’t want to talk about your relationship status in that last meeting.” Then she lifted a brow, giving me a chance to explain.

“Because I’ve officially been dating him less than a week,” I said. “I do not promise to marry him. If he treats me like a toy, I will dump him. I’m not riding on the PBR’s Tough Enough series to find love. I’m here to earn a check. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“And yet your scores are going down,” she reminded me, making it clear the sponsors *had* noticed.

“But I haven’t been bucked off,” I countered. “Scores are half due to the rider’s ability, and half due to the bull’s. The animal we ride is assigned randomly, so I have little control over that. My world ranking has been steadily increasing, and I’m getting good at staying in the top ten.”

She smiled. “Nice answers. Now for the big question. Max says he intends to have your official PBR photos taken next week.” She flicked a finger at my upper chest. “Willing to show a pink Under Armour shirt under that one?”

“Not showing my cleavage,” I told her.

“No, but it looks like you have on something under that. Blue?”

Which was true. I had on a blue tank, just in case my shirt got torn. It was a thing my dad had taught me about the time I

started wearing a bra. But the fact that she could see it surprised me, so I glanced down. Sure enough, where my top button was open, a smidge of blue was just visible.

“It’s a tank,” I explained. “In case they have to cut off my shirt.”

“And Under Armour makes tanks,” she pointed out. “I just think pink is working very well for you.”

So I nodded. “I’m not opposed, but official pics usually have our vest on.”

“Ah,” she muttered. “Yeah, that would likely cover it up.”

“Ma’am,” I went on, “I just want it to be clear that I’m here to ride bulls. Nothing else.”

“Then ride them,” she told me, offering her hand again. “Ride them hard, Cody. It’s a good way to show what our clothing can withstand. Corporate’s watching to see how you place, but I’m rooting for you. Let’s make it clear that being a woman doesn’t mean the same as being weak.”

CHAPTER 38



GRACE WALKED AWAY, so I turned to lean my rump against the pipe rail fence which marked the outer boundary of the Cheyenne arena. On this side was the parking lot. On the other side was an open area for the paying crowd, with the arena and such just beyond. From here, I could just see Ty and the gaggle of ladies who were fawning all over him.

A pair wanted a picture with him, but as their friend called out to take the shot, both women leaned in to kiss a side of Ty's cheeks. He laughed, hugging them close and flirting his heart out. If I'd thought J.D. was bad with his fans, well, Ty was even "worse."

The man clearly knew how to schmooze, and from the look on his face, he was loving it. One of the girls dared to grab his ass, making Ty jump. I was willing to bet there'd been a comment in there about his chaps making her do it. I knew because Shelby and I had often said the same thing, although I'd never been brave enough to do the groping.

"Aw, no fans?"

The sound of Austin's voice made me want to groan. I tried to ignore him, but when the four guys - Austin, Eli, Derek, and Casey - sauntered past, I couldn't help but notice they didn't have any fans hanging on them either.

"Hunting for someone who might be impressed with your latest ride?" I called back.

Austin just lifted his middle finger in my direction. "No one wants you here, Cody."

“Feeling’s mutual,” I assured him, refusing to let him get me riled up. “Besides, I’m still placed higher than you.”

“Fucking bitch,” Eli grumbled.

Derek and Casey said something as well, but it was to the other guys, and I missed it. Still, they kept walking, which I was willing to call a win. The shitty part was that they were right, I did want some fans. I hated the way this entire event made me feel invisible.

The PBR just didn’t know what to do with me yet, I tried to tell myself. Max was going to handle it, I’d been riding for three whole events, and I was still an unknown so far as my record went. That was all true, but I’d also seen guys break into the scene with a bang, and they got a lot more attention by the media. Cameras were shoved into their faces. The reporters followed them around behind the chutes. I got none of that - but I also didn’t want it.

And yet I did want to make it. All of that was part of the deal. If the media hyped me up, the sponsors would come quickly. The sponsors meant money. Money meant chances for a life after riding bulls. A life meant fulfilling my own dreams, and dreams meant that maybe one day I’d look back at all of this as the “good ol’ days.”

I knew all of that, and it was starting to feel like a tow rope, hauling me forward. One step, then the next, that was what I needed to focus on. For so long, all of this had been a pipe dream. Now that it was a reality, I wanted to rush right to the end, but it didn’t work that way. I had to play the game. I needed to pay my dues. I had to make the rides to prove I could do it. I had to finish the season, and then get back on for the next. Hell, J.D. had been at this for nine years. Three events was nothing.

Which was why I didn’t have as many fans as Ty. Glancing up, I found another set of women pawing all over him as they leaned in for selfies. Officially, he was a single man, and I had a feeling they all knew it. Hands were pressed against his chest. Smiles were directed at him with just enough seduction

added that I was feeling a little jealous. I also couldn't say a damned thing.

This was the game. I knew it. But while I was watching, a guy moved to my side and politely cleared his throat. I looked over to see a lean cowboy holding a shirt, a poster, and even a travel mug with that line drawing I'd seen earlier. The one that had a woman on the back of the bull and splashes of pink.

"Um, Cody Jennings?" he asked, glancing down at my chaps.

"That's me," I agreed.

And his face broke into a smile. "I thought so! I mean, the pink is a good hint, but it's not like we get to see your face."

"The helmet," I realized, pushing away from the fence to give him my complete attention. "What can I do for you?"

So he thrust the poster out at me. "Can you sign this? I've been watching your rides, and the announcers keep talking about your form. They say you've got more talent than any other rookie coming onto the scene this year."

"Really?" I laughed in surprise as I took his poster.

For this guy, I unrolled the whole thing and found a good spot to put my name. I had to use my thigh as a backing, but when I signed it, I made it big enough to be proud of, and then rolled it back up. He kept talking the whole time.

"And because you've been riding, I can even get my girlfriend to watch with me. She's so excited to see a woman actually competing in a male sport. Never mind that you keep winning!"

"Not winning," I corrected.

"You won in St. Louis," he countered, offering me a shirt next. "I got this for her. Is it too much to ask for you to sign that too?"

"Not at all," I assured him as I wrote my name on the shoulder area.

Because while some women might want the guys to scribble on their boobs, most of us would prefer the focal point be a little *higher*. Still, it gave me a chance to see the merchandise up close, and I liked it. The graphic was fun, tough, but also just a little feminine. It reminded me of a female superhero, and the sort of thing a guy would be willing to wear too.

“They did good with these,” I said as I passed it back.

The guy chuckled. “Yeah. Sounds like J.D. Adkins was saying he needs a combined version with both of you on it. I guess you two are on the same team or something?”

“He’s my mentor,” I explained. “We both ride for Tillman.”

“Don’t know what that means,” the guy admitted, “but I’m just... Thank you for talking to me. I can’t wait to tell Sabrina. She’s going to be so pissed that she missed this, but she had to work today.” He paused. “Um, hey. I know this is a big ask, so tell me if I’m out of line?”

“Ok?” I had no idea what he was wanting.

“Sabrina’s worried about the bulls and the ropes around their balls. She says it’s mean, which is why she doesn’t want to watch. Maybe I can get a video of you explaining why it’s not like that, and then show her I met you?”

“Sure,” I agreed, waiting as he pulled out his phone.

“Ok,” he said as he held it up. “Cody Jennings, the first woman good enough to ride on the Tough Enough series. Explain to my girlfriend how the ropes work?”

“The bulls are fitted with something called a flank rope,” I said, looking right at the camera port on his phone. “It’s just like a belt and goes low on their waist. It does not hit any of their sensitive parts. Think of it more like a saddle on a horse, and it lets the animals know it’s time to work. We riders put a rope around their chests that we use to hold on. Together, it’s just a harness, and no penises or testicles are squished in the process. That would make the bucking painful, thus less impressive.”

“Nice,” the guy said before tapping a button to reverse the camera and moving to my side. “See, Sabrina, I told you it wasn’t cruel. And I met her in real life. She’s twice as cool as you thought.”

He leaned in, so I reached an arm around his back to get our heads as close together as possible. The guy continued to talk for a moment, rambling on about how he wished she was here, and he was telling me all about her, and that he’d made sure I knew she was my biggest fan. He hadn’t, but I got the point.

Then he flipped the phone from video recording to photo and snapped a few selfies. I leaned in even more, putting us cheek to cheek. If I was honest, the guy’s enthusiasm - and knowing his girlfriend was rooting for me - felt *damned* good.

Then, “Hey!” Ty’s bellow was the only warning I got before he yanked the guy away from me. “Hands off, bud!”

“Fuck you,” my fan huffed. “I asked first!”

“And you were looking at her tits!” Ty grumbled.

“I was looking at the camera,” the guy insisted. “Fuck. And I was going to get you to sign some stuff next. What the fuck, man. Get kicked in the head too many times?”

“Ty!” I hissed. “He’s fine.”

“He’s not fine,” Ty insisted, “and he needs to get out of my sight before I have him thrown out for harassing a rider.”

“I’m sorry,” I told the guy even as I grabbed for Ty’s arm. “Lay off, Ty.”

“Stay the fuck away from her,” Ty growled at the guy, all but ignoring me.

So I pulled as hard as I could, which was enough to make Ty stumble away from my fan. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!”

Ty just thrust out an arm to point at the guy I’d been having such a good chat with. “You know what he’s wanting, Cody. Don’t act like that was something innocent.”

“Really?” I huffed. “Kinda like those girls wanting your signature?”

“Exactly!” he agreed, his voice getting louder.

For a moment, I just stared at him in complete shock. “Oh, so it’s ok for you to have fans, but not for me? What the hell is that?”

“I don’t want some guy out here thinking he can rape you,” Ty insisted. “All he wanted was to see your ass in those chaps, have proof that you have tits without that vest to hide them, and - “

“No!” I cut him off hard. “We are not doing this right now, do you hear me?”

So Ty leaned in. “Fine. But I’m here to keep you safe, and I know exactly how the guys at these things think.”

“Because you thought it yourself,” I shot back. “Oh, I promise I’ve heard that line a million times. Know what? It still doesn’t make it ok for you to chase off my fan. My *one* fucking fan, Ty.”

“And I told you that I’ll handle it,” he assured me.

I just tossed up my hands, turned, and walked away. I could not deal with this right now. I had no idea what had just crawled up his ass, but if this was Ty’s idea of being my “protector,” then it was going to have to stop.

“Cody!” he snapped, hurrying after me.

I spun back to face him, thrusting my palm up to hold him a pace back. “I have a job to do. A job, Ty, and I don’t need this kind of protection. I don’t need any of this bullshit.”

“So I should just let them paw all over you and not care?”

“Yes!” I groaned. “Fuck. I’m not sure what part of this is so hard to get, but the last thing I need you to do is smother me with your so-called protection. I’m a goddamned bull rider. I don’t need you acting like *I’m* the pussy who can’t take it. In case you missed it, I was doing just fine on my own before you even knew I existed!”

CHAPTER 39



HER WORDS HIT me like a slap to the face. How had she not seen that guy leaning in so close, his eyes dropping down on his screen to check her out, or that his arm around her waist was *much* too close to her ass. Shit, that was how all the guys out here thought. Most men. I knew, because I was just as bad.

All I'd wanted was to make him give her space. Cody was too trusting. None of these idiots around us gave a real shit about *us*. They wanted to see a big wreck. They kept hoping one of us would get carted out in an ambulance - or even better, be able to tell their friends they were in the stands when someone died.

Cody, however, wanted to ride, and she'd been doing just that.

But when she turned to walk away from me, I followed. My "so-called" protection? I knew what this crap was about. I'd been listening to it for years. I'd seen what we did to each other long before she ever showed up. Never mind that I actually gave a shit about her!

I didn't want to see her get hurt. That girl had worked her way past all my defenses, and I gave a real shit about her. A big one too. She was my girlfriend, and I couldn't even say that, so was it really so wrong that I wanted to make sure my woman stayed safe, happy, and focused out here?

"Damn it, Cody!" I snapped when she didn't slow down. "Stop walking away from me."

She just stretched her legs a little more, then ducked into the building at the side, using one of the security guard-protected entrances. The guy working there nodded at her, looked at me, and I saw confusion on his face. I also didn't slow down.

Then she grabbed my arm and yanked me into one of the many rooms this place had. "What the fuck are you doing Ty?" she demanded.

"I'm looking out for you," I reminded her.

"All weekend long?" she asked. "No, that's bullshit. You've basically been pissing on me, smothering me, and chasing off my fans."

"Like fuck I have!"

But she shoved closer, lowering her voice to the kind of angry growl women didn't often use. "We *just* talked about this last night. I'm trying to do my job, and that job includes fans. Fans bring sponsors, sponsors bring money, and money is why I'm doing this. So are you. So is J.D. It's what pays our bills when we break our bodies, and you're doing nothing but getting in my way."

"And you said you were ok with a protector," I reminded her. "I didn't say shit when Austin walked by. No bully stuff, right?"

She just lifted both hands to her head, and then thrust them out like her mind was exploding. "What the hell are you thinking?" she demanded.

"You said bullies," I repeated, pretty sure I was missing something.

"I also said you can't distract me!" Her voice was verging on a scream. "Maybe you think I'm weak, Ty, but I'm not."

"I never said that!"

"No, it's just how you *act*," she countered. "But you know what?" She gestured with one hand back in the vague direction we'd come from as if she was trying hard to make a point. "I

was right. You need to think real hard about that, because it's true."

"What's true?!" Ugh, she had to be PMSing or something, because none of this made any sense.

"I was doing a whole hell of a lot better before you took an interest in me!"

Yeah, that was what she'd said before, but clearly she'd forgotten a few things. "Oh, really?" I asked. "You mean like when your rope got greased and you couldn't afford a backup, so I loaned you one? Or maybe you mean like when you were qualified, but didn't have a ride to the arena? That kind of better? The kind that would still have you back in Middle-of-fucking-nowhere, Missouri? *That* kind of better?"

"Fuck you, Ty," she grumbled, turning to storm out of the room.

So I caught her arm, pulling her back around to face me. "No, if you want to have a fight, then fine, we'll fight."

"But that's the thing!" She yanked her arm out of my grip. "I *don't* want to have a fight. I'm so done with this. All weekend long you've been acting like I'm some little prize for you to show off, and I'm just..." She pulled in a deep breath, and it was like all of her anger just vanished. "I'm so fucking done."

"What the fuck does that mean, Cody?"

She pressed a hand to her forehead and shook her head. Not an answer, but she was clearly negating something, and I really didn't like how this felt.

"What the hell?" I asked next.

"Leave me alone, Ty," she said softly. "I just... I can't do this."

No, I didn't like those words. They made my balls crawl up inside my body and my guts tie themselves into a knot. What couldn't she do? What the hell was she trying to say?

Because all I'd done was find a way to stay close to her. I was supposed to be *helping* her, but it felt like every time I

tried, she got pissed off about it! Was it so wrong that I liked her this much and wanted her to know it?

Hell, I'd been hanging myself out there for her to kick since the first time I'd seen her. That first beer in that first bar, and now this? What more did she want from me? I hadn't fucked her when she was drunk. I hadn't stopped her from "dating" Tanner to help her friend. Shit, I'd even let that whole mess turn into something real, stepping back so she could have the kind of fun the rest of us took for granted.

I hadn't treated her like a fucking prize! I'd treated her like a goddamned goddess. I'd said ok when she wanted other guys. I'd cheered for her, fought for her, been all respectable around her daddy for her, and more. All I'd asked for in return was a little attention, but all weekend long, she'd been bitching me out!

"Can't do what?" I demanded, because I deserved an answer to that at least.

"This!" she insisted, gesturing between us. "I don't need you smothering me, acting like you own me, and making me feel like you're a real bull rider while I'm just a little sideshow to hang off your arm while I'm convenient."

"That is not what I'm doing!"

"No?" she scoffed. "Because you keep all the fans away from J.D., right?"

"And he can handle himself," I reminded her.

Her mouth just fell open and she stared at me. "Oh, but I can't?"

"You're the one who told me those guys are stronger than you!" I roared, stepping closer. "You said I could play the bodyguard. Last night, you seemed to think it was a real good idea, but when I do it - "

"You step all over me and forget that I have goals too," she broke in, finishing my sentence, "I made it clear I have to impress the sponsors, and I don't want to be your little trophy - wife, girlfriend, or otherwise!"

No. Nope, that was not what she meant, was it? It couldn't be.

Damn it, I wanted to puke. My balls had moved even higher, as if they could hide from her temper, but that just left the rest of me hanging out here to take it, and she wasn't saying things real clear. She might be saying a lot, but those words. All of these words. No, they sounded all wrong.

So my mouth flopped open and I couldn't fucking stop it. "Are you dumping me?!" I growled.

Her jaw clenched. She pulled in a breath. I saw her delicate little hands clench at her sides, and then she lifted her face and those baby-blue eyes of hers were as cold as J.D.'s had ever been.

"Yeah," she breathed.

My heart stopped.

She pulled in another breath. "I think I am, Ty, because I can't do this. When you figure your shit out, let me know, but I'm not *anyone's* toy. I'm not here to make you happy. *I'm here to ride bulls!*"

I watched as she turned, and this time I couldn't even manage to reach my arm out. That little hellcat settled her hat on her head better and stormed out. Her ass looked so good in those pink-and-black chaps. Her strides were purposeful and powerful.

And she was walking right the fuck out of my life.

I couldn't even follow her. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, and couldn't make my voice work. I felt like someone had just ripped my lungs from my chest - or *something* in that area - and it hurt more than any hit from any bull.

"Cody," I tried, but it came out as barely even a whisper.

She was gone. Turning the corner, she vanished from sight - and more. I had no fucking idea what I'd done to deserve this. Last night, she'd melted in my arms. I'd given her everything I had to give, and I thought we'd found something

real. I thought the two of us were going to be amazing. I'd been so sure she was the right one for me, and then this?

"Motherfucker!" I roared, my fear, anger, and frustration finally finding a way out.

Then I kicked, sending a trash can out into the hall to bounce off the far wall. I wanted to hit something, but there were only cinder block walls around here. I needed to make something hurt - but not her. Never her. No, if she wanted to tear me apart, then that was her right.

But my vision was getting blurry, and I wasn't about to cry out here. Nah, not where someone would see me. Instead, I leaned into the anger, letting that take over. And when I stormed out of that room, I turned the opposite direction Cody had gone.

Fuck her. If she was done with me, then I'd be just as done with her. Oh, she thought she was so much hot shit? Well, just wait until Austin decided to carry through some of his threats. I'd still be there to stop him, and *then* she'd have to thank me. Maybe then she'd see what she'd just thrown away!

But she had thrown *me* away.

Fuck! I kept my feet moving until I saw a restroom, then ducked inside it. Pulling off my hat, I cranked up the water in the faucet and splashed that across my face. Now if someone saw moisture in my eyes, I had a real good reason.

Because I would not cry over her. Real men didn't do that.

But damned if my eyes weren't welling up.

I fucking *needed* her!

Why couldn't she see that I'd just been helping? How could she walk away from me like that? Fuck! This had all been easier when I'd fucked 'em and kicked them out. This shit? I didn't like how it felt none. It hurt. All of me hurt. I felt like I was going to hurl, and I had no fucking idea how to stop this.

So I splashed more water on my face. Then even more. Out in the halls, I could hear the guys coming back, which

meant the signing event was over, but so was my thing with Cody. We were over. Done. Finished.

She'd dumped me.

Well, if that was what she wanted, then I'd make sure she regretted it. I wasn't sure how, but I'd find some way to make sure she missed me. I would make sure leaving me became the dumbest thing she'd ever done. If she thought she could just forget me, she was so wrong.

Because I needed her to miss me. It was all I had left to hold on to.

CHAPTER 40



THE PANEL CLANKED as I yanked my glove down my rope, adding more rosin to it. The dark bull rope in my bag peeked out, reminding me of what had just happened. Ty had bought me that rope. I should give it back, but I didn't want to see him, to talk to him, or anything else. I just wanted to get my gear ready, because the event was going to start soon.

Maybe I added too much rosin, but this was just about all I could handle right now. Besides, was there such a thing? I didn't fucking care. I just kept yanking, the use of my arms feeling good in a way that distracted me from everything else in the large room where the other riders were getting ready.

Then J.D. looped his rope up beside mine. "Where's Ty?"

I yanked even harder and shook my head. It was the best I could do for an answer right now. Even hearing his name made my throat pinch up, and I would not whimper like some little girl. Nope, I'd known this was going to end badly.

It had.

It was over.

I was still here.

J.D. gave me a confused look and then started working his own rope. Twice more, he looked over at me. Maybe I had resting bitch face going on or something. I wasn't sure, but he waited a while before he got brave enough to ask again.

"Cody?" Pulling off his glove, he tossed it down by his helmet and turned to face me. "What's goin' on, hun?" Then

he turned and looked across the area pointedly.

My eyes flicked in that direction, but I only needed a split second to recognize Ty towering over everyone else on the other side of the room. Yeah, of course he'd be in here. Everyone was. That didn't mean I wanted to think about him.

But J.D. wanted an answer, and I needed to give him one. "This morning sucked," I grumbled.

He nodded. "And? You pissed at him again? Thought you two worked things out last night."

I pulled in a hard breath, checked the area around us, then leaned in to whisper, "I think I just dumped him."

J.D.'s eyes were the color of strong coffee in the sunlight. His lashes were so dark. He also didn't blink as those words sank into his head. Those eyes held mine for just long enough that I felt my hands want to shake and my throat start to pinch again, and then he grabbed my shoulders and turned me around.

Walking me before him with a hand on each shoulder, he directed me to one of those alcoves where we'd gotten dressed that first day. Once there, he pushed me around the corner then shifted to put himself between me and the doorway.

"Talk to me, Cody?" he begged.

I just shook my head, mostly because that was the best I could manage.

So J.D. shoved a hand across his mouth. "You dumped him or he dumped you?" he tried next.

"I did," I mumbled, but the words were too high, too pinched, and too weak-sounding.

So his head rocked slowly. "Something happened out there?"

Yep, that did it. Thrusting a hand out in what I hoped was the direction of the parking lot, I wanted to yell at the top of my lungs, but held it down to a pissed-off hiss.

“He chased off my fans, J.D.! You know I need the sponsors, but if anyone looked at me, he was glaring back, moving between us, and then he *shoved* - actually shoved - the one guy who wanted me to sign a poster. I had *one!*”

“Oh, you had more,” J.D. promised. “They just couldn’t see your short little head out there.”

“Or Ty was chasing them all off,” I grumbled. “So I told him to stop, and he got pissed, and...”

That was where my voice decided to get all tense again, so I shook my head. From the look on J.D.’s face, it was enough. He understood. And from the softness in his gaze, I got the feeling he’d figured out that asking more wasn’t helping me any.

“So fuck him,” he decided. “For the rest of today, fuck all of this.”

“I need - “

He caught both sides of my face and made me meet his eyes one more time. “I know,” he breathed. “Trust me, I know, but listen to me. Just this ride. Just this bull. All the rest of this bullshit? We’ll fucking deal with it later. Right now, you are Cody Jennings, the amazing woman showing the PBR that she’s hot shit. You are my goddamned rookie, you hear me? You are a fucking badass, and fuck the whole fucking world.”

Yeah, that was what I needed, so I jiggled my head, but not so much that I broke his touch. Those soft brown eyes flicked from one of mine to the other, then he nodded once as if he’d found what he wanted.

“Wanna hit somethin’?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted, but the words were a mumble.

“Then take it out on the bull, Cody.” His voice shifted to something hard and sharp. Dangerous. “You take all that anger you’re holding on to right now - and everything else you’re feeling - and you push it right down into your boots. You let it sit there, stewing, and when you get on your bull, let it all loose. That’s what makes you strong. That’s how you push

through it. That, rookie, is what separates the men from the boys, you hear me?"

I nodded, feeling like something inside me was letting go. It started with the pinching of my throat, but the vice grip on my chest wasn't as intense either.

"And you just pretend like none of the rest of this exists," he went on. "Keep your head down if you wanna, or up if that feels better. Just know that in nine years, I ain't never had no one at my side like you. I don't call you my rookie cuz I think you're hot. I mean, ya are, but that's not why. I say it because you're that damned good. You hear me?"

"Yeah..."

"But ya don't believe me," he grumbled. "Well, all them boys out there do, and that's what's got Austin's panties in a wad. You are the best fuckin' bull rider in the building. You might be new, and ain't no one figured that shit out yet - 'cept me. But you know what these boys do to the good ones? They beat my ass behind the chutes for being half Mexican when I started. They're trying to beat you down another way. Tell yourself that. Scream it out loud if you have to. Fucking punch a wall if it makes you feel like you're holding on to that fight." His thumb swept across my cheek. "Just not with your riding hand, ok?"

That earned him a breath of a laugh. "I'm still right-handed."

"Trust me, I know," he promised. "Now, when we get out there, you're gonna unlock your phone and give it to me. I'm gonna send your daddy a text, so that's one less thing for you to worry about. Then, we're gonna get our shit, look like the devil done come down to the PBR, and go lord over these idiots out by the chutes. Get me?"

"I got ya," I assured him.

His eyes dropped to my lips, but he let go and stepped back. "Yeah, you get me."

Then we headed back to our gear and did exactly that. Maybe J.D. was pulling a bit more of his typical "asshole

mode” than he had in a while, but I was ok with it. It also made me feel like it was ok for me to be a snappish bitch.

Not that I was, but I was pretty sure that if I said anything, it wouldn't have come out all sweet and polite. So, once we were ready, the pair of us stormed up the alley between the cattle pens and found an empty spot at the back of the catwalk. From there, we could watch the other riders, distracting ourselves - mainly me - by critiquing their form.

Until Ty came out of the chute.

I checked the scoreboard, surprised to find him in fifteenth, and then I remembered that he got bucked off yesterday. No, I would not let myself care about that. Instead, I tried to force my eyes to Tanner, watching him shift and prep for the buzzer to go off.

I didn't want to see Ty's amazing form. I didn't want a glimpse of his sexy smile under the boring black helmet he was using today. I certainly had no interest in checking out his ass, chest, or anything else. But when the pyrotechnics went off, Tanner rushed in, hooking Ty around the waist to move him out of the way, and the bullfighters got the bull out in seconds.

Naturally, Isaac passed the rope to Tanner who carried it back to Ty. And there, with everyone watching them on the big screen, I saw my boyfriend slap my ex on the shoulder like they were old friends. Ty paused. A few words were traded, and then confusion took over Tanner's face.

“And now he knows,” J.D. said softly beside me.

Up on the leaderboard, Ty's score flashed: 84.0. It wasn't good, but I hadn't seen his ride. A part of me hoped he was as miserable as I was, but I refused to let my mind go there. Not now. Not until all of this was done. I wasn't here for social games, but rather because this was my *damned job*.

I crushed my back teeth together as hard as I could. I would not feel a thing. I was J.D.'s rookie. Today, I was a bitch - because that was easier than wanting to cry over a guy. I would make sure I was a bitch. I had this, I didn't feel a

thing, and all those emotions were down in my boots waiting to be released.

“Save it for the bulls,” J.D. mumbled.

It sounded like a mantra, and one I was more than willing to hold on to. Back home, the guys had tried to chase me off like this. My first kiss had been a dare. Losing my virginity had been a months-long setup to break me, hoping that would scare me out of bull riding.

Back then, I’d cried. I’d screamed. I’d called Shelby and raged until I couldn’t talk anymore. Now, I was a professional bull rider, and I had bigger things to worry about. Men came and went. I’d fucked him because I’d wanted to. I deserved a few one-night stands just as much as the next bull rider, and so what if I was a woman?

I also had a very sexy boyfriend. I had an amazing mentor. More than all of that, those two were my friends, and I was not going to let a little heartbreak chase me away from the one thing I was good at. I was here to prove a point, and if the sponsors didn’t like it, then fuck them too. If the fans had a problem with it, well, they’d get used to seeing me eventually.

I was not a damned toy! I was not on “easy mode.” I wasn’t here for anyone but me, and the last thing my daddy had said before heading back home was that he was proud of me. I might be a girl, but my father had named me after two of the best bull riders in rodeo history, and I was going to prove that I was even better.

So fuck Ty. Fuck this ache in my chest. Fuck the way my eyes kept stinging until I blinked a few times. Fuck all of it.

My name was Cody Lane Jennings, and I was a bull rider. Nothing would change that. Not those boys, not these men, and certainly not a broken heart. Nope, the only thing out here today that might be tougher than me were a few of the bulls, so I just had to cowgirl up and be tougher.

CHAPTER 41



Ty's 84.0 was a crappy score for him, but with a buck-off yesterday, it didn't matter. He didn't have a chance of catching up. Thankfully, that meant he headed back inside where I didn't have to look at him while the rest of the riders got their turn.

I refused to think about why his ride had been shit. I would not feel bad for him. Instead, as the cattle mooed and shuffled into place for the next set of riders, I turned my eyes to Tanner. He was out on the sand, his attention locked on the next gate like a football player watching the ball. As soon as it opened, the bull fighters began to move.

Tanner was good. He watched those animals like he could understand what they were thinking. When the rider finally came off, he was right in there, always the first one to get a hand on the bull. This time, it turned away easily, yet I'd seen him jump in the way to save the rider quite a few times this weekend.

That was the kind of protection I wanted. It was the kind that respected me and my ability to do this, not like that crap Ty had been pulling outside. Jealousy had its place – and I wasn't immune from feeling it – but it wasn't the same as possessiveness. *That* was what Ty had done that pissed me off.

All weekend long, he'd been trying to act like he owned me. He didn't. No one did. That was one thing my daddy had taught me, and it was the only reason Cole hadn't been able to break me. I was used to bull riders thinking they'd hit on me -

or fuck me - for a bit, then break my heart to chase me off. It seemed to be their favorite attack.

Back home, the boys had been convinced that being a girl meant breaking my heart would make me shatter. They'd been told girls were soft and ran on emotions. I wasn't. Well, I didn't want to be, so I focused on my goals. And yet this whole thing with Ty? I didn't really think he was trying to run me off.

It was just easier to tell myself that right now. To think about how Cole had failed. I'd picked myself up once, so I could do it again, and anger was tougher than tears. Thinking about how Ty had fucked up kept me on track. Remembering those sweet moments we'd had, or how he'd made me feel beautiful, brilliant, and like I was good at this? It wouldn't do me any favors.

Besides, it didn't matter how incredibly gorgeous Ty was or how sweet he'd been in the past. The way he'd acted this morning - let alone all weekend - crossed a line I couldn't ignore. It said he thought he was better than me, and there was no way to build a relationship with that as the foundation. Not unless I wanted to give up "me" in the process of being "his."

But I needed to stop thinking about him. Crossing my arms over my chest, I matched J.D.'s stance. Both of our feet were shoulder-width apart. Both of us glared at everyone who passed. We didn't need to talk, because we knew what came next. This was just keeping track of the competition until it was our turn to show off.

It came soon enough. Since I was still sitting in fifth place, I was once again riding in the set of bulls before J.D. I watched as the chute attendants raised and lowered the separating gates. The number eight rider, Jaxon Cade, hurried to the other end to pass over his rope.

That was when J.D. finally decided to say something. "You got your head where it needs to be?"

I nodded slightly. "Yep."

"Lying to me?"

That earned him a chuckle. “No, I want this.”

He reached up to scratch at his beard. “Just promise me one thing.” Then he turned to look at me, our hats almost colliding. “Just this ride. Just this bull.”

I dipped my head in agreement. “Right here, right now. I promise.”

“Then ride that asshole like you’re making a man pay.” And he pushed away from the railing to head over to my chute.

I had to turn back to get my rope and helmet, but I wouldn’t run after him. This was *my* fucking ride. Maybe J.D. was getting in place early, but that was ok. He was gonna pull my rope for me. This was why we worked, because he treated me like an equal. He trusted me. And the way he talked to me made me feel like I could honestly do this.

The gates were clanking and the crowd was cheering. It all felt like some kind of a blur. Right here, right now. That was what I hung on to. When I passed my rope to the attendant for my bull, my internal mantra changed a little bit.

Just this ride.

Just this bull.

I had this. I was going to show Ty how much I had this. Fuck that, I was gonna show the whole goddamned world that I had this.

If they wanted to think I was a joke because I was a girl, they were about to be so disappointed. My one fan said the announcer thought I had talent. J.D. said I was the best bull rider in this arena. Maybe I shouldn’t care what anyone thought about me, but those two things were what I needed to hear, and now I just had to get to work.

A glance showed the guy beside me strapping in. The moment his gate opened, I stepped over the rail to hover above the back of my bull. The chute guy lifted the end of my rope, and J.D. hopped over to take it – not caring that the last rider was still in the arena. I focused on getting my handle in place.

Once I had it the way I liked it, I glanced up at J.D. He pulled. The bull was not impressed, so he thrashed. His head slinging and tail flipping was enough to make me step higher, giving him room to be stupid. And yet, the moment he settled down, J.D. just pulled again.

This time, the bull tried to come over the front. Its head came up, a leg went over the divider between it and the section before it, and I had to jump out of the chute. With a pissed-off snarl, J.D. just pulled a little harder.

It was like there was some fight between him and this animal, but when the bull put his feet back on the ground, it was clear who'd won. Now, it was my turn. Once again, I made my way back into the chute, then started warming my rope. I yanked that thing as hard as I could, getting a little frustration worked out. When it was warm, I moved on to the handle.

I could almost feel the people moving around on the catwalk. The noise was different, but I didn't look up. Today, I was serious. This was my job. Nothing else mattered. Fuck the rest of the world if they didn't like it.

Shoving my gloved hand into the handle, I reached over to take the rope from J.D. When he pressed the tail into my palm, his eyes met mine.

“The moment your pussy hits the hair, pull all that shit out of your boots and burn it like it's gasoline.”

I nodded once, then he crossed back over, patting my helmet on his way. The arena was clear. It was my turn. All I had to do was get this rope tight enough around my hand that nothing was going to throw me off. One time around. Then two, just to be a little crazy.

Once my hand was good, it felt like the entire world took a breath. Everything paused. For a split second, I had an eternity to decide how I was handling this, and I wanted to be a little crazy. I was tired of being the good girl, having people call me sweet, and getting that confused with my ability.

I was J.D.'s goddamned rookie.

Decision made, I pulled my feet off the rails, dropped onto the bull's back, and nodded in one smooth move. The gate guys had to hustle to get the latch released. The metal swung open, and my bull surged out.

Up. Higher than I'd ever been before, this bull threw himself towards the sky, but I was right there with him. When we reached the top, he kicked out. My right arm was in the air with "Girls Do It" waving above my head for everyone to see – because I was doing this.

All four feet hit the ground at the same time. The beast slung his head to the side, dust drifted from his hide, but he was bluffing. He didn't want to go that way; I could feel it in his back. So when he reared up again, I wasn't surprised at all.

Then I added my spurs.

I wanted bigger. I wanted better. Clenching my arm, I pulled my crotch right up against that handle and dug in with my heels. The bull's hips went so high that he crashed into my shoulders, but I didn't budge. I had this.

Around to the right, he spun out of my hand. As his bucking started to get consistent, I gave him a little more spur, flapping my leg to get that much more bite to it, and the beast responded. He had all four feet on the ground again then switched directions, letting his hips lag behind.

I felt myself slip, but I didn't give a damn. I just clenched my riding arm harder and pulled. He wanted to make me look weak? He thought I couldn't take care of myself? Let him see how good I could do when nothing was stopping me.

All the frustration, all the anger, all this sadness, insecurity, and rage that was fueling me came out. I had no clue why J.D. thought I should put it in my boots, but just to prove the point, I flopped my legs harder, telling myself I was shaking it out.

Again, the bull launched into the sky. One more time, he landed hard, but I didn't rock forward. Keeping my chin tucked to my chest, I just sat up there and took it. That was what we girls were supposed to do, right? Everyone else pushed us around, but we just adjusted, adapted, and took it.

That was what made me the best bull rider here.

Because I could do all of that. I also wouldn't let go. No, this was going to be a ride to remember, and I was gonna spur it on, making it as big as I fucking could. Let the world see my heartache. Maybe Ty was even watching. This was how I handled the pain in my chest, because *I* was the one in charge here.

I went where I wanted. I made my own decisions. I was unstoppable. I was definitely tough enough, and if that man thought I would cry over him, then he needed to learn I wasn't that kind of girl. I was the kind chasing a gold buckle.

“Cody!”

I put my spurs on it again, feeling this animal give me even more, and I loved it. Nothing else mattered but the feel of controlling this much power. Right here, right now, I was completely invincible. I had it all in the palm of my hand, and I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to go back to reality. I just wanted a bigger buck, a higher rear, and a louder roar from the crowd.

“Cody! You're done!”

Lifting my eyes – but not my chin – I saw Isaac waving both of his hands before me. That was the sign that my ride was over. I'd completely missed the buzzer and the fireworks. I'd been so far into the zone that I hadn't noticed anything else, but it seemed I could get off this wild ride now.

Flipping the tail of the rope around my hand, I felt the first bit of slack. I had to do it again, because I'd wrapped myself in there good. The bull also felt the rope releasing. The moment this guy's head went down, however, Tanner was rushing in. I yanked my hand free and went off the side a second before Tanner tapped the bull's forehead, taking its complete attention.

To my right, Jorge pointed, giving me a hint of which way to go. Across the arena, Isaac was running to assist Tanner. The group of them were between me and the chutes, so I made for the side, but the bull saw my movement.

It charged. I ran faster. Jorge tried to intercept, but a flash of purple appeared out of nowhere. Just as I reached the closest panel and hauled myself up, I heard the crowd groan. Glancing back, I was in time to see Tanner in the air, but he landed easily on his feet. He'd also just confused the animal enough that Jorge had it trotting back to the chutes.

The moment the bull gate closed behind it, Tanner made his way towards me. I released the panel and hopped down to meet him halfway. That ride had been amazing. I knew it, just like I knew it was exactly what I'd needed, and yet my guts were starting to twist again. Tanner knew about Ty. He had to. I'd made a big decision this morning, and now I was waiting for the fallout.

"Hey," he panted, throwing an arm over my shoulder to guide me back to where my rope was laying in the middle of the dirt. "Ty said you dumped him? He full of it?"

"No," I said softly, trying to release the buckles on my helmet.

He nodded. "You ok?"

I shrugged.

"Are we ok?" he asked next.

I pulled off my helmet and leaned my head against his shoulder. "Yeah, I hope so."

"Then we are," he said. "And that? That was one of the best rides I've seen in the history of the PBR, Cody." He paused, shifting to face me. "Know what that means?"

"I might get a sponsor?" I guessed, since that had been my goal all weekend.

He wrinkled up his face and shook his head. "Nope. It means that no matter what, you *got this*."

I had just enough time for his words to relax the knot that was taking over my insides. A second, maybe two, of feeling the euphoria of knowing I'd made the right decision. J.D. believed in me. Tanner did too. I wasn't fucking this up!

And then the announcer called out. “And that wild ride gives Cody Jennings a score of 81.25.”

“What?!” Tanner roared, spinning back to the board.

“That’s bullshit!” J.D. was screaming from the far side.

A few people in the audience were booing, but the numbers were right there. I hadn’t scored that low in my entire time with the PBR. Watching my name slide down the list, I was surprised I didn’t feel sick.

No, I felt pissed. This weekend was turning out to be complete shit! So far, I’d watched my scores slip lower and lower, the sponsors hadn’t come begging like I’d wanted, and now I’d even lost Ty. I’d given my everything this weekend, only to feel like I was going to end up losing it all, and there wasn’t a damned thing I could do to stop it.

So yeah, pissed might be an understatement, but I’d also just learned how to deal with that. I pushed this feeling down into my boots.

CHAPTER 42



I SNAGGED my bull rope from the ground and stormed out the gate. There, a set of stairs led me back up to the catwalk behind the chutes. I barely spared a second to toss my rope over the back railing before turning for the second chute at the end. Bracing my hands on the top bar once I got there, I leaned over and pushed out a pissed-off breath.

“You deserved a better score than that.” The words made me look over to see Jake. He offered a weak smile.

So I gave him one back. “Thanks. I thought I was going to break ninety with that ride.”

“Shit. Should’ve been a ninety-four,” he grumbled just as J.D. reached my side, shoving his rope at the chute attendant.

“You good?” he asked.

I looked over and met his dark eyes. “No.”

Fuck it, I was done hiding my feelings. If he wanted to know, he could have a little raw honesty. What surprised me was that he nodded in understanding. He didn’t try to talk me out of it, say shit to make me feel better, or any of that. J.D. just accepted that I was pissed and rolled with it. Oddly, that made me feel... good? I wasn’t sure if that was the right word, but it was the best I had.

“Let’s see if it’s you or them,” he told me before stepping over the rail and into the chute.

The gate beside his clanked, but fuck waiting. I wasn’t a pretty little thing that might break, and half these cowboys

were pulling while someone was riding. Like I had so many times before, I headed for the gate to grab the tail of J.D.'s rope just as soon as it was available.

He glanced up through the grill of his helmet and nodded once. That was all the warning I got before he started yanking the rope, but I had this. The harder he pulled, the tighter I made this thing. I could see the rope across the bull's back dimpling its fat, but I didn't care. My mentor was going to have the best ride of his life, if I had anything to say about it. That would at least make up for my shit score a bit.

I heard the boom of the pyrotechnics. I didn't bother to look, though. J.D. yanked on his handle, getting everything where he wanted, and then I pulled again. His bull danced but didn't lunge, so I pulled a little more. When the animal tried to come up to relieve the pressure, I decided that was good.

Then J.D. took the end and started his wrap. My job here was done, so I stepped back to the catwalk, not surprised at all when Jake was there to give me a hand down. I didn't need it, and I was pretty sure I glared at him for the kindness, but he smiled back sweetly before heading for his own chute.

J.D. spared me one last look before dropping onto his bull's back and nodding. The sound of that metal latch was all it took. He knew it. I knew it. Hell, the bull knew it, and before the gate was even moving, the creature was turning for his exit with gusto.

The pair exploded from the chute with a groan from the bull and a puff of dust filling the air. J.D. was pushed back, but his seat didn't budge at all. When the bull hit the ground, my mentor proved why he was the best in the PBR.

He didn't just spur. He all but flapped his feet against the animal's side, sending his black-and-red chaps flying with the effort. The bull bucked. It kicked. It reared. When it refused to spin, J.D. all but grabbed the beast with his knees and twisted him into it, forcing as many points from this ride as possible.

For the first time in my life, I started to realize what was possible. No, I didn't ride that good, and while J.D. kept saying I was better than him, I really wasn't. He had this. The

man was the master, and that hunk of bovine had just become his servant.

Higher. Bigger. When the bull started to tire, J.D. egged it on, sitting up there like he'd been born to ride that power. His hips rocked, taking what he wanted. *That* was what he meant when he said to ride like I fucked! His hand pulled, keeping him from being slung around, all that upper body strength working to his advantage.

I could see the sparks of flash photos being taken. Some were close. Others were across the way in the audience. This? It was the kind of ride that we all wanted on our posters, and J.D. was making it look easy.

All too soon, the buzzer went off. I grabbed the rail a little tighter, knowing the dismount was the dangerous part, but I shouldn't have worried. J.D. unwrapped his hand and slid off the side, landing on his good leg, then skipped a step away.

Tanner slapped his arm as he passed, moving in to do his job. J.D. didn't stop, jogging his way back to the still-open chute to climb halfway up to me. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't look pissed either. He looked proud, and I was pretty sure my face matched.

"Nice ride," I said.

"Almost as good as yours." Then he twisted to look back, waiting for the score.

The bullfighters got the arena emptied out without a hassle, and seconds ticked past. Finally, J.D.'s score was posted, along with the video of his ride. There, at the bottom of the big screen, for all the world to see, it clearly said 91.0.

And with that, J.D.'s mood turned dark. His eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched, but he didn't say a damned thing. He didn't need to. He'd just scored almost ten points higher than me, and for an easy ride. Had he earned it? Yes, but so had I.

A moment later, Tanner made his way over with J.D.'s rope. He didn't say a thing, possibly because he could read our mood, but J.D. nodded his thanks. Then he climbed over the

rail to my side. Tanner was barely out of the chute again before Jake's gate clanked open.

"Fucking bullshit," J.D. muttered under his breath as we turned to watch the top rider of the day try to keep up.

I murmured my agreement. "I swear my rides are getting better each time, but my scores keep dropping."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Pretty sure it's not you."

Maybe so, but that didn't help anything. "Are they trying to chase me out?"

"I honestly dunno." He glanced over for a split second, then back to Jake. "Don't think Ty was, though."

Yeah, I didn't want to talk about that, so I slapped his shoulder. "Well, I'm not winning today."

The words were barely out of my mouth before the buzzer went off for Jake's ride. Like the professional he was, he got himself free and went to make his dismount. It wasn't as clean as J.D.'s, but his ride hadn't been either.

My eyes jumped to the scoreboard. Out on the dirt, Jake was gathering up his gear, and the bullfighters were doing their thing. Seconds ticked past. I felt like I was holding my breath, but I had to know. I desperately needed to see Jake's score. I wanted proof that my own score was an outlier.

88.50

The moment it was posted, Jake's name dropped into second place, which pushed me into seventh overall. I tried to console myself with the fact that I was still in the top ten, but it only helped so much. That J.D. had won again actually made it a little better.

"Give me your stuff," I told him.

He just grunted and turned me towards the alley that would take us inside. "Sunday. We get a whole display this time."

Right. Joy. And with the mood I was in, the last thing I needed was to have a spotlight shining on me as my name was barely mentioned. Still, when we hit the main alley, I dared to

glance back, checking the scoreboard for Ty's placing. Mostly, I just wanted to make sure I wouldn't be standing too close to him. I wasn't sure I could take that.

Seventeenth place overall. Depending on how they did this, I might not even need to see him! That was enough to make me stretch my legs.

Once we reached our gear, we started packing up. I found my phone in the bottom of my bag and swiped at it, intending to let my father know I was ok, but there was already a message waiting from him.

Dean:

Wow! That is the kind of ride to brag about!
You got screwed on the score. Bull did too.
Still, I got it recorded, sweetie. I think I may
have screamed loud enough for the whole
town to hear.

So I quickly whipped off a reply.

Cody:

Thanks, Dad. I'm in seventh, which isn't
where I wanted to be. Gotta do the awards,
and then I think I'm going to the bar to make it
hurt a little less. Don't worry, I'll talk Tanner
into driving!

Dean:

You deserve it. Just know that I'm proud of
you. More than proud. You have no idea,
Cody Lane. You just made an old man feel
like he did something right.

Cody:

Love you, Daddy. Make sure to tell Cole.
Night!

Locking my screen again, I shoved my phone into my back pocket, then focused on getting my rope, helmet, and such all stored away properly. I'd almost got the bag closed when J.D.

lightly tapped my arm. I looked over and he pointed, sending my eyes across the room.

Max was making his way towards us with the biggest smile on his face. “My two favorite clients,” he called out.

“Hey, Max,” J.D. said.

But Max tipped his head at me. “I’m actually here for Cody. Do you have a moment before the awards?”

“I hope,” I said.

He moved to lean his back against the panel, which only made his belly even easier to see. “Well, I just want you to know I’ve pestered the PBR to finally get your official pics done. Everyone else already has theirs up, and they’re used in a lot of promotions, so are you sticking around a bit?”

“We’ll make sure of it,” J.D. answered for me.

“Pictures?” I asked.

Max smiled. “The same ones they plaster on the signs for the shows. If you have one, then there’s a good chance you might end up on billboards, which is good for Tillman.”

“Yeah, but my scores sucked this weekend,” I pointed out.

Which made Max’s smile vanish. “No, I know. Still, official PBR photos are a good thing, Cody. They also make you look a lot more permanent, which should help me get you a few more patches on your vest. I told you if you focus on the rides, I’ll handle the sponsors. I’m just keeping up my side of this bargain.”

“The PBR sure isn’t,” J.D. grumbled.

“I know,” Max said, making it clear which side he was on.

“And?” I pressed. “If the judges are determined to make sure I don’t win, then what can I really do? No sponsor is going to want to sign with a rider that’s clearly being pushed out, right? I mean, what exactly is in it for them?”

“You,” Max said.

“Huh?”

He reached over to rub my arm gently. “You, Cody. That’s what they’re getting. The woman who is tough enough to push the boys to try harder. The young lady who isn’t afraid of being told no, getting thrown off, or anything else. The bull rider who is terrifying enough that the entire sport is afraid of her potential. You are an impressive woman, and if they don’t like it, you don’t quit. You don’t give up. You aren’t crying or whining about the unfairness of it. You’re just riding harder, sticking to bulls that jump higher, and giving people a reason to *talk*. For sponsors, talk equals money.”

“And it doesn’t matter if they’re talking because they hate you,” J.D. added, sounding like he’d heard this before, “because they’re still talking. Bad press is good press when it has your face everywhere.”

“So I don’t need to be winning to impress the sponsors?” I asked.

“Winning is one way,” Max assured me. “Throwing punches like J.D. did is another. I think you’re figuring out a third. The first woman on the PBR’s Tough Enough series, making it clear she really is ‘tough enough?’” He canted his head in something like a shrug. “The outlier. The underdog. The rebel. I don’t care what you call it, but you are the thing people tend to root for.”

Which gave me something to hold on to. “Ok, I can do that,” I agreed.

“Good,” he said, “so at least try to smile when you’re out there? Don’t let any of those fans know that the pressure’s getting to you. Make it clear that you, Cody, are stronger than that.”

I grunted, making a face at him as I shook my head. “I dunno about smiling, Max. I had boy problems today.”

Max immediately looked over at J.D., who shook his head. “Ty,” J.D. whispered.

“Ah,” Max said. “I’m sorry, Cody. I really am. I’d offer you a willing ear or a shoulder to lean on, but I have a feeling J.D. already has that covered. Just know that any time, for any

reason, I will listen.” Then he leaned in, wrapping me up in a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

For a moment, I tensed, unsure what to do, and then my arms went around his waist and I hugged back. Max didn’t let go. He didn’t relax his grip. He just hugged me the way I hadn’t realized I’d needed until something inside me began to soften a little. I dropped my head to his shoulder, feeling my breath rush out as the tension I’d been carrying all day finally found a way out.

“And now,” J.D. told me, “you got this.”

He wasn’t wrong.

CHAPTER 43



PEOPLE WEARING PBR shirts flooded into that main room. Someone in headphones called out a name, lifting his hand. I had a feeling that was last place, which was always who they sent out first. J.D. made sure our gear was packed away. I took my hair out of the braid and gave it a little fluff under my hat. Then we headed to the back of the line.

He was the big winner this weekend. I was just in seventh. The irony was that three weeks ago, seventh would've made me feel like I was on top of the world. Now, I knew I could do better. That was why I was annoyed with this.

And annoyed was the best word I had. I wasn't pissed. I couldn't make myself feel that angry. Every time I tried, my mind immediately went to Ty, and I had to push back sadness. This entire weekend had just sucked! Only a few days ago, I'd felt like I'd had my dream right at the tip of my fingers, and now it was slowly falling apart, one piece at a time.

Counting down, I found my spot in line, then wanted to groan. Right in front of me was Derek, the asshole who'd tried to play keep-away with my rope. I put a little space between us, but there was only so much I could do. Letting out a dry chuckle, the idiot turned around to run his eyes over me.

"Well, well," he taunted. "Looks like you're not as hot as you think you are."

I grunted, making it clear I wasn't falling for his crap. "Right. Funny, because I'm above you."

“And she’s sitting at sixteenth overall.” That was a voice I didn’t know well, and it came from behind me.

I turned to see Wes, one of the younger riders on the circuit. He gave me a gentle smile, then hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his chaps. I nodded my appreciation - because he’d just stood up for me in his own way - then turned back to the front.

But of course it couldn’t be that easy. Eli made his way over to slip in behind Wes. “Who’d you blow to make it into the top ten?”

“The announcer,” Wes replied. “Got a little rug burn on my knees now, but it was worth it.”

That was enough to make me spin around. The question had been for me. We all knew it, but Wes’s answer wasn’t throwing me under the bus. The guy had just thrown himself in the line of fire - for me? And when I looked, I saw him shrug with a silly little smile on his face as if he’d just told the best joke ever.

“What?” he went on when Eli didn’t reply. “You did ask.”

“I fucking meant her!”

“Weren’t specific,” Wes said, reaching forward to grab my shoulders and nudge me forward. “I mean, we losers have to do whatever it takes, right? Ain’t that what you been tellin’ me all year? Fuck off, Eli.”

That was when the line began to shuffle forward. We had to walk all the way through the alley to make it out onto the arena, which kept Eli or Derek from saying anything else. There, the fans could see us, and the cameramen were crowded close, doing their best to make sure our faces were up on the big screen at the right time.

One by one, we walked through the spotlight, had our name called and listened to the crowd cheer for us. Then we were lined up in front of the chutes in two arcs that would make a pretty display for those watching at home. The arena was now dark. Lighting effects swirled across the dirt. The

bullfighters and Cletus were set up in the very center, and the announcer was spilling out names as fast as an auctioneer.

But the moment we stopped, I leaned over towards Wes. “Hey, thanks,” I told him.

He shrugged it off. “Those four hit all the rookies. Last year was hell for me, so kinda feels nice to give them some back.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but it’s even nicer when someone speaks up.”

He nodded before offering me a smile. “Just so you know, a few of us are cheerin’ you on, even if you usually beat us.”

“Thanks,” I said again. “I mean it. I’ve had a shit weekend.”

“Yeah, you really have. Shit’s not fair,” he assured me. “When they call this the toughest sport on dirt, I sometimes wonder if they mean the bulls or what happens behind the chutes.”

“Or both,” I decided.

I dared to reach over and clasp his arm, just so he knew how much his help meant to me. It didn’t matter that a few thousand fans might see. I honestly didn’t care if any potential sponsors had a problem with it. Max said to do this my way and that I was selling myself. Well, this was me, and even after the craptastic weekend I had, guys proving they were on my side? They needed to know it helped.

This weekend I’d learned the PBR had a few more things in common with my hometown rodeos than I liked, but guys like Wes gave me hope. I hadn’t had those back home. Instead, I’d gotten nothing but the hate. The guys had slashed my tires, tried to trash my truck, fucked with me in the locker rooms the one time I tried to use them, and more.

Then there’d been my love life. Cole had dated me for months until I trusted him enough to give him my virginity. Then, he’d used that to make sure he broke my heart, hoping it would chase me off. That crew was sure I wouldn’t be able to

ride if I was crying, so they did their best to keep the tears flowing - and yet, I was still here, while they weren't.

If I was honest, Ty hurt more. I'd honestly *liked* him. For a moment, I'd been convinced he and I had something special. When Tanner had needed my help, Ty had been so cool with it! Now this? It wasn't that he'd been a little jealous. I could've handled that. Shit, the thought of a guy like Ty being jealous over me was flattering.

No, the issue was the smothering. It was how he acted like I would break sometimes - but not others. He had complete faith with me on a bull, but the moment I wanted to talk to someone, get serious about this as a career, or focus on taking care of myself, he'd gotten pissed. Did he know something I didn't? Was that what had changed this weekend?

I was torn between wanting to apologize to him and needing to explain how much it hurt when he acted like I was some weak and helpless little girl. Basically, I just needed a chance to *talk* to him, and to do it where a million ears weren't trying to hear the wrong thing. But what would I say? I knew Shelby would have some words of wisdom for me, but it was too late to call her now, with the time zones and all. I should've thought about this earlier.

But thinking about Ty had my eyes running down the line to find him. If I was in seventh, then Derek was eighth. That meant he should be over there, but he wasn't. I saw Austin, who'd also had a buck-off, so I was pretty sure that was about the right area. Confused, I looked the other way. Still no Ty. Where the hell was he?

The glare of the spotlight landing on a cowboy near me jerked my mind back to the present. It moved to the guy in tenth place. The announcer called out his name, and Jaxon Cade lifted his hat in acknowledgement. One by one, our places were called out. Our names and hometowns were made into a big deal. I was starting to get used to this ordeal, but when the lights landed on me, I couldn't manage to bring up a smile.

I lifted my hat and looked up, seeing my face on the massive screen where our rides had been replayed. Across the way, women screamed enthusiastically. A few men added their voices, but I couldn't miss some guy at the side.

“Take it all off, baby!”

I just let my eyes close in a slow blink, knowing my reaction was up there for everyone to see. Was that what this was? Had the PBR decided that the “apple pie girl” should become a different kind of joke? Well, fuck that. I wasn't getting in the kitchen to bake for them. I wasn't going to smile at jokes that weren't funny. I certainly wasn't going to cry because a few cowboys had a problem with me.

I'd given that up years ago.

Then the lights moved on. The moment they were off me, it felt like a weight lifted. Unfortunately, another took its place. This was my dream - didn't these people realize that? This was the only way a girl like me could make a life for herself. I wasn't like Shelby. I didn't *fit in* back home. I wasn't a nice little lady, and I couldn't become one just to make others happy.

I was a goddamned bull rider.

So I lifted my chin a little more and tried to fake it through the end of this. When the light moved to the third-place finisher, I realized he was on top of the chutes again. So was second place, Jake. It made an impressive display, literally putting them above the rest of us, and with the effects the PBR was known for, those men looked like gods.

J.D. was placed right in the middle of it all, even higher than the rest. When the spotlight hit him, he lifted a fist into the air in some sign of resistance, but his head was tipped down at me. It took me a second to realize this was a sign of solidarity *with me!*

He didn't need to say a word. He didn't try to preach. J.D. simply lifted his hand over his head and focused his attention on me. A few other guys turned to look at me as well. The strange thing was that I didn't want to shrink into myself.

My shoulders relaxed. My chin lifted. I felt my lips curling. One side of J.D.'s mouth twisted to match. Even with the music and announcements playing so loud that we didn't have a chance of saying a thing, his expression said enough.

He stood with me.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur. In some cases, that was literal. The bursts of smoke and lights made it hard for us to see much of anything on the ground. When the whole ordeal was finally done, the last prayer was said, and all the buckles had been handed out, I had no problem hurrying back to grab my stuff.

J.D. and Tanner returned together, walking side by side. I glanced up, aware Tanner had a bag with him this time. When he reached my side, Tanner snagged mine as well, hanging it beside his own while J.D. had to get his own gear.

"So," Tanner said, "while you all were lining up, I decided to grab some of my stuff. Yes, I'm inviting myself to your room, Cody. You ok with that?"

"Yeah," I assured him, realizing it was true. "I'm not sure if I'm going to be a lot of fun, but I'm definitely ok with some company."

"Chopped fuckin' liver," J.D. grumbled even as he nudged me towards the exit. "And since we're stickin' around tomorrow for your picture day, we should let the rest of this crew get ahead of us. Let them all race to Des Moines while we relax and recover, right?"

"I just want to see these pictures," Tanner teased. "The pissed look is working for her."

J.D. snorted a laugh. "And that's a good way to sleep on the couch. I mean, if her room had a couch, which it doesn't."

"No, he's fine," I assured them. "I am pissed. I've had a shit day - that wasn't really that bad." I groaned. "Ok, that makes no sense, but that's how it feels."

"It makes sense," Tanner promised. "You got screwed. Things sucked. You also rode all three, which is still better than most of these boys."

But we didn't talk about Ty until we were in the truck and headed back to the hotel. I was dreading the confrontation I knew was coming, so I asked J.D. if he'd get my stuff from that side for me. But at the same time, I knew I needed to talk to Ty, so I changed my mind, saying I could do it myself. The third time I flip-flopped, Tanner couldn't take it anymore.

"I'll get your stuff," he announced. "Then you can talk without anything else in the way. Or not talk if you aren't into it. It's ok, Cody. Believe it or not, we get it."

"We do?" J.D. asked.

"Haven't you ever had a bad breakup?" Tanner asked.

"Nope," J.D. said. "Ain't never had a someone to breakup with like that."

"And now you have Cody," Tanner told him.

J.D. glanced over at me, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "Yeah. I got you too, Tanner. Figure there's a first time for everything, even me not screwing up. I'm gonna let Cody show me how it's done."

"Bad news," I grumbled. "Right now, I feel like I've screwed up this entire weekend."

CHAPTER 44



TOGETHER, the three of us made our way through the hotel lobby, heading for the elevator. My eyes were jumping around, expecting to see Ty everywhere, but I didn't. On our way up, I felt my heart start to race, knowing I was getting ever closer to a thing I couldn't take back. The long walk down the hall to the last door felt like it took forever.

But when J.D. opened it, there was nothing but silence inside. No TV from the next room. No open door between our side and the other. I tried to ignore it, claiming the bed closest to the bathroom as my own, but J.D. went straight for the dividing door.

He didn't knock, didn't call out. He simply opened it and stormed through. Then there was nothing.

"Cody?" J.D. called back, after a pause that lasted far too long.

I rushed to the door and across to the other side. What I saw before me was not at all what I'd expected. The beds had been made by housekeeping. My bags were carefully lined up on the table where Ty had fucked me so hard the night before. My dirty clothes were beside them. The stuff I'd put in the bathroom was on the counter beside the TV.

Everything else was gone.

Every hint that Ty had been here had been removed. That was what he'd been doing instead of standing around at the awards ceremony! He'd come back here and cleared out so he didn't have to talk about it? So he didn't have to face me?

The sight of so much nothing hit me in the gut like a fist.

I gasped. It wasn't a sob, but it wanted to be. I also wouldn't let it. In order to keep my balance, I had to grab the back of the chair next to me. Even worse, the longer I looked, the more I realized how meticulous he'd been. A few things I'd left in his truck had been brought up and put beside my bags. My date clothes bag, as an example.

Everything of mine was right here, in perfect condition, and all alone. Ty had just removed himself from my life with an almost surgical precision. The pain, the frustration, and the rage from my entire day all began to boil up. Leading them all was the pain. The one that came from the center of my chest and felt a lot like heartache.

Before my brain even kicked in, I spun and headed back to the other side. I didn't want to see the proof that Ty was gone. I didn't want to feel like this. I certainly didn't like the way my eyes were stinging over a guy who'd treated me the way Ty had.

My feet were moving. I wasn't watching where I was going, so I bounced off the door frame, likely bruising my arm in the process, but I didn't care. I just needed to be back on the other side. On J.D.'s side. On the side where Tanner had been so sweet so many times. I liked it better over there, not this. Not the vacancy of the room that had once been Ty's and mine.

"Cody..." J.D. tried, his voice trailing behind me.

"Hey..." Tanner breathed as I passed him. "You ok?"

"Not even close," I growled. "He's gone, Tanner."

"You dumped him," J.D. reminded me as he stepped through the doorway after me.

So I spun back to face him. "Yeah, I did. After he kept trying to mark me as his territory all weekend long, I told him to stop. Instead, he doubled down, so I *did* dump him. He also asked me to."

"What?" Tanner asked, clearly confused.

“Well, he brought it up,” I clarified, aware that I wasn’t making much sense. “And we were out at that stupid fan bullshit where we couldn’t talk about it. All day long, I’ve been bracing myself for explaining why I was mad, and now this? He’s not even going to have a *conversation* about this?”

“Cody, it wasn’t even three weeks,” J.D. reminded me.

Tanner shot him a look. “Right now, you need to shut the fuck up, J.D. You aren’t helping.”

“Gotcha,” J.D. mumbled, dropping down to sit on the closest bed.

Sadly, I knew he was right. I did. That didn’t make this hurt any less. Ty had exploded into my life in Tulsa. He’d made himself memorable at that stacking party back home. In St. Louis, he’d made me feel like I was on top of the world, unstoppable, and maybe even beautiful.

And now it was all crashing down.

Gently, Tanner guided me over to the bed, encouraging me to sit down beside him. “Cody, what happened? Not this morning. All of it.”

I licked my lips as my brain spun out of control. All of it? How was I even supposed to make that make sense? Never mind whining to my current boyfriend about breaking up with my secret boyfriend. Didn’t that break some rule of romance? Still, I owed these guys the truth. J.D. had stood with me through all of this. Tanner? I was terrified I might send him running next, but he deserved to know.

“Ty’s been a little possessive,” I tried, looking over to J.D. for some hint of whether I was fucking this up already.

J.D. just scoffed. “It started Thursday, with Ty getting pissed because she didn’t fuck him fast enough.”

“What?!” Tanner snapped.

“No...” I groaned. “I was in the shower, and it was the day after my date with you, you know? And I was washing my hair.” Yeah, this was not easy. “I mean, I had conditioner

running into my eyes, so I wanted to get under the water, and he took it wrong.”

“Next thing I know,” J.D. said, taking over, “those two are screamin’ in that room over there. I thought Cody was about to cut his balls off, so I decided to help, and Ty’s all pissed because he’s used to those damned buckle bunnies. New girl every night, get me?”

“Fuck that,” Tanner said.

“I know, right?” J.D. insisted. “But Cody stood up for herself real good. She made it clear she just wanted a little gentle, because sounds like you took her to pound town. And, well, with ridin’ and all...”

I was dying.

Tanner ducked his own head, and I caught a little blush on his cheeks. “Yeah. Ok. So that got sorted?”

“Well, J.D. kinda reminded him that I need to think about some things the night before I ride,” I mumbled. “And Ty got all sweet, apologized, and I thought it was ok.”

“But?” Tanner pressed.

“Well, then he got weird at the events.” Because Tanner had to have noticed that. “He didn’t want to hang out with us at the bar because he thought people would think the wrong thing.”

“Mhm,” Tanner mumbled. J.D. made a noise of his own that sounded like these boys were on the same page.

“But when he got drunk and I took him home, he was sweet. I mean, he wanted to fuck, but he was too drunk. He kept saying something about how all men do is take. I thought he was trying to say he wasn’t like that, but I guess maybe it was a warning? I don’t know anymore.”

“Then he had his way with her Saturday night,” J.D. said. “I mean, we both heard that.”

“But we talked about him being my friend,” I reminded them. “I told him that he can’t be all stupid about the guys

talking shit about me. He jumped out of his chute to push at Austin!”

“Possessive,” Tanner said, showing he was keeping up.

I nodded. “And then he wrecked that bad? When I saw him lying in the sand like that, I was sure he was dead. I hated thinking that he’d gotten distracted from riding because of my bullshit, so I asked him not to worry about the guys talking shit.”

“And?” Tanner asked.

I shrugged. “I thought he was ok with it. He said he had to beat back the bullies because that’s the only thing that works. I pointed out that I can’t fight those guys and he won’t always be around. I told him that giving them nothing - “

“Don’t feed the trolls,” J.D. said.

“That,” I agreed. “And he sounded like he was ok with it. But he got it in his head that he was going to be my protector. Like I *need* a protector!” I tossed my hands up in frustration. “And then once we got into the crowd this morning, he was chasing off my fans. Any guy who looked at me got Ty all bowed up and ready to throw down, you know?”

“Which doesn’t help with her sponsors,” J.D. added.

I shook my head. “Thing is, I’d made it clear to him why I wanted a sponsor. Why I need more! I thought he understood, but he kept saying he’d cover me if I needed it, and how I shouldn’t worry about the money.”

“We do this for the money. It’s called a job,” Tanner said, proving he completely understood where I was coming from.

“I know!” I said. “I just want a chance to make my *own* future, not have some man do it for me.”

“Never mind that it makes you dependent on that guy,” Tanner said. “And how are you supposed to prove yourself if he’s paying your way to every event?”

“But it would keep her in the seat beside him,” J.D. pointed out. “Ty’s kinda dumb like that.”

“No shit,” Tanner agreed.

I just pushed out a heavy breath. “Yeah, but we couldn’t really talk about it. Not at the arena.”

“Where anyone might hear that she’s not *your* girlfriend,” J.D. clarified.

“Fuck!” Tanner huffed. “No, that makes sense. I mean, shit. Cody, you don’t have to worry about taking care of me like that, ok?”

“Yeah, but Austin was spreading rumors that you’re gay,” I reminded him.

“And now the whole world has seen me kiss you,” he countered. “I think I’m good. Even if things blow up, it’s pretty clear I’m not gay. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want you to dump me, but I also understand if it’s easier.”

“Not dumping you,” I assured him. “Shit, I wasn’t even really meaning to dump Ty, but he wasn’t listening. I told him to back off, and he starts talking about some fan raping me or some shit. Like, he was on some kind of testosterone high. I said I couldn’t do this, and he asked if I was dumping him, and it just kinda happened.”

“Is that what you want?” Tanner pressed.

This time, J.D. was silent. He sat across from us with his hands clasped in his lap, and his eyes were jumping between me and Tanner. I got the impression he was letting Tanner lead, but also hanging on my every word. But Tanner’s question wasn’t an easy one.

“What I want is for none of this to have happened,” I said softly.

“But it did,” Tanner reminded me. “So what are you going to do, Cody? Do we track down Ty so you can beg him to come back? Do you want to say fuck it and move on? Drink it away? Watch movies and pretend like you’re not in your own life for a couple of hours?”

I huffed out a laugh. “Do you know all the girly tricks for dealing with a breakup or something?”

“Actually, those are my tricks.” His pretty hazel eyes found mine. “All I’m trying to say is that I get it. You liked Ty. Shit, the guy’s gorgeous. He’s fun, he’s charming, and he’s...” He gave me a shy smile. “A lot of man.”

“A good bull rider too,” I added, since that was another thing I’d liked about Ty. We’d been able to talk about the one thing that mattered most to me. “But I’m not going to ignore that crap, Tanner. I mean, how can I respect myself if I’m letting him walk all over me? I keep saying it, and I would’ve thought Ty had heard me, but I didn’t come here to get ridden. I’m not a buckle bunny, and I wasn’t looking for a boyfriend.”

“But you got three,” Tanner said.

“And now I have two.”

He shrugged with just one shoulder. “Unless you talk to him.”

I just thrust a hand at the room beside ours. “He left. Clearly he doesn’t want to do any talking!”

“Or he’s scared to,” J.D. said softly. “I know I would be. If a woman like you said she was done with me? I’d run so fucking fast, getting outta there before you could see my tail tucked between my legs.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Me too,” Tanner agreed.

I looked between the pair of them. “So, maybe I should at least try talking to Ty?”

“You could,” Tanner said gently, “but that would mean going to the bar. I’m pretty sure he’ll be trying to drink away his pain. It’s what all the guys on the tour do, and Ty was always pretty predictable before you showed up.”

I pressed my lips together and tried to think about that. Did I really want to see him again? Yes! Oh definitely yes. But I wanted to see him in a good way, to at least talk this out, and make it clear I still liked him - and that I wasn’t a doormat.

“What if he doesn’t want to see me?” I asked.

“Then we’ll be there to distract you and buy you as much whiskey as you can keep down,” J.D. told me. “Cody, I ain’t goin’ nowhere. Not now, not ever.”

“Me either,” Tanner promised. “And if you dump me, I’ll be waiting for you to want to talk. That night, a day later, week, month, or even a year. Don’t care. So who knows, maybe Ty’s just trying to drown his pain? Maybe he can learn?”

I nodded. “Ok, but...” I thought back to that bag in the other room. “...Is it a bad idea to want to look good for this?”

“Nope,” Tanner promised. “Cody, if you wanna get all cute, I promise I’m on board.”

“She meant for Ty,” J.D. said.

Tanner just shrugged. “Maybe. I also don’t think it matters. The cuter she looks, the more he’s going to see what he’s missing out on.”

So I pushed to my feet. “Then I need all the help I can get.” And I headed into the other room to find something that might even be sexy.

CHAPTER 45



MY DRESS WAS BLACK, short, and low-cut. There were little lace accents around my ribs and biceps that showed the skin underneath. The skirt of it flared out, making it perfect for dancing. Shelby had picked this one out for me, and while I'd always loved it, I'd never been brave enough to wear it before.

Tonight was the night.

When I stepped out of the bathroom with my face painted up and my hair let down, the guys murmured in appreciation. Not the polite kind, either. Nope, they ran their eyes over me in a way that gave me that bit of confidence I needed. My raspberry lipstick - which matched my dancing boots - helped a little too.

While I'd been fixing my face and hair, the guys had done a little prettying-up of their own. J.D. now had on a black shirt and jeans. That made the gold buckle at his waist hard to miss. Tanner had put on a t-shirt that was at least one size too small and proved the boy was ripped. Even his abs were traceable like that. Side by side, those two men were nothing alike, and yet perfect complements to each other in a way I enjoyed too much.

Tanner announced he was driving, then hooked me around the waist and led me out. J.D. had my ID and phone. As we headed to the truck, they explained how they'd tracked down Ty, texting their friends to see if anyone knew where he was. Come to find out, he'd gone back to that bar with the mechanical bull, along with most of the rest of the tour, so that was where we headed.

I walked into a packed club. The music was a little louder than I remembered. The mechanical bull was going, but the music hadn't stopped this time. The bars had lines, and my guts were trying to make themselves into a ball in my middle. I *wanted* to do this. I also really didn't.

"Liquid courage," J.D. said, tugging me towards a bar at the side.

When it was our turn, J.D. held up four fingers at the bartender. I tried to laugh at that, but I couldn't quite manage. Tonight was not a party night. This was going to end up serious, one way or another. I just hoped it became a good serious, not a messy, crying and blubbering type of serious.

The bartender lined up the shot glasses and poured right in front of us. J.D. passed the first to me, taking the second himself. Tossing a bill down on the table, he met my eyes while the bartender filled the last two. I lifted my glass, and he matched me, then we threw them down the hatch.

The whiskey burned, so when I slapped my glass back on the counter, it was a bit harder than I intended. From behind me, Tanner slid my glass forward and gestured to the bartender to fill it back up. J.D. passed me the next, and the guy with the bottle refilled my first glass.

Shot number two went in. Then three. That was when I waved them off, but J.D. had matched me glass for glass. Even better, the warmth of the liquor was starting to set in, and it was exactly what I needed.

"Go dance," Tanner said into my ear. "Relax, Cody. You got this, so enjoy it a bit."

"I'm supposed to talk to Ty," I reminded him.

"And I'll see if I can find him," he promised.

I glanced back to find him right there. On impulse, I leaned in to press my mouth against his, stealing a kiss, and then turned to J.D. My mentor's normally devious look had turned a little sly as he pulled me up against his chest. Tanner made a shooing motion at the pair of us, and J.D. was more than happy to oblige.

The music was the fast and fun kind of country. The dance floor was packed. J.D. pushed his way in, keeping me right up against him, and then stepped off. I tried to follow, but two-stepping was still kinda hard. The first time I kicked J.D.'s foot, he smiled. The second time, he laughed, and it was like the sound pushed away all of my anxiety.

I still had these guys. Tanner and J.D. were amazing, and the fact that they were together made me feel a lot less guilty about liking both of them this much. And yet I liked Ty too. I hated how he'd been acting, but I didn't hate *him*. I hoped I never would.

But as we swirled across the hardwood, J.D. must've seen something on my face. "You ok?" he asked.

I bit my lips together and shook my head. "Not really."

"Ty?" he asked.

I shrugged, managing to shove my foot into his one more time. "All of it, J.D. I mean, I'm trying so damned hard to make all of this work. When I went to Tulsa, I just wanted to ride a professional-level bull. I did."

"Shit, you rode all three," he reminded me.

"Yeah, and I started to think I had a chance!" I moved closer, draping an arm over his shoulders. "And now this? I learned how to spur. I know I rode better this weekend than last. But in St. Louis, I came in first. Here? My scores went down every time."

"Yeah. They fucked you bad, but the bulls weren't that great neither," he pointed out.

"And yet you managed to get a ninety-one."

He made a face. "Ok, yeah. Good point. I just dunno what to tell ya, babe. I mean, you're right. You got fucked, and there ain't no way to hide that."

"And everything is falling apart," I told him. "My rides were good, but I was seventh!"

"Still went up in the world rankings," he tried.

I scoffed. “A bit. But if my scores suck, then sponsors aren’t going to be screaming for me. I need that money, J.D.”

“Why?” he pressed.

“So I can be something more than a little girl in the middle of nowhere. So I can make my own life. Because I’m fucking good at this!”

“That’s my girl,” he praised. “Now how we gonna fix it? You gonna worry about everything, or you gonna focus on makin’ changes?”

My mouth opened to answer, but nothing came out. Instead, I paused to actually think about what he said. Sadly, I didn’t have an answer.

“I don’t know,” I finally told him. “It’s just that I feel like it’s all crashing down, and with Ty? I don’t know. I mean, do I just want to talk to him to rewind this weekend? Do I even want him back? I think I do, but what if he showed me who he really is and - “

“He didn’t,” J.D. promised. “I know that man, and while he’s a pig, he’s just tryin’ too damned hard. I’m not sayin’ you’re wrong. Not at all. I’m just sayin’ that he’s not a piece of shit. If he was, I woulda chased him off a long ass time ago.”

Which felt good. Real good. J.D. really was like a pit bull, but he was *my* pit bull, and I never could get enough of that. Being with him was so easy. He was my friend, my mentor, and when his eyes held me like they were right now, he held promises of so much more.

“What about us?” I asked.

“What about us?” he asked back.

“This!” I insisted, the whiskey removing the filter between my mouth and my mind. “I’m dancing with you, but you’re just my mentor. I have to keep reminding myself that Tanner’s my boyfriend, Ty was supposed to be my protector, and you’re... I dunno, here to teach me stuff?”

“All the stuff,” he promised.

“But it’s too much!” I insisted.

His feet paused and then he angled me to the side, guiding me off the dance floor. When we were out of the swirling traffic, he turned to face me, and his face had turned serious. Those dark eyes of his were warm, though. Soft, almost.

“I told ya on the way here that I’m your friend. Damned good friends, Cody, and I don’t have a whole lot. So this ball’s in your court.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, “but...”

“No,” he insisted. “You heard Tanner back at the hotel. Ain’t no one gonna be callin’ him gay now. They’ve seen him with you. The two of you are cute as fuck, and it...” He tapped his chest. “Damn, I like that, get me? But us? We’re a team, and I don’t care how you wanna define that team, but I’ll take it. Shit, I’ll take whatever ya give me.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He glanced down to the floor, but one corner of his lips curled higher. “Means that if ya don’t wanna keep secrets, then I’m not worried about shit people say. Means that *you* are leading this show. Cody, all I’m sayin’ is that if you think this is too much, and if ya feel like you’re drownin’ with this bullshit, then tell us how you want it to work.”

“I want to start winning again!” I insisted.

“And I can’t do shit about the judges,” he countered. “All I can change is what we have. Me and you, Cody. So, if you wanna be with Ty, and you think that’ll make him fix his shit, then you do it. If you wanna just be with Tanner, then you just say the word and I’ll become the bestest best friend you ever had. Only thing is, if you want me to forget all about ya, I can’t do that. Ain’t gonna happen.”

“No,” I told him. “God, no, J.D. I have no intention of changing things between us.”

He huffed out a relieved breath. “Ok, good. But so ya know, I ain’t scared of what people will say. I like ya, Cody, and a whole lot. I like all of ya, from how you ride to how you talk to me like this, and I promise I’m not scared of people askin’ why I’m not chasin’ other girls. Tanner’s not either, and

this thing we're doing, it shouldn't be weighing you down. We're supposed to be the thing that holds ya up."

"But if they think I'm sleeping with both of you, they'll start calling me a slut next," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "Might. Might say it anyway. All I'm sayin' is that it's your call. If you don't wanna worry about hiding shit, then stop. Don't hide it. Don't mean you have to tell anyone neither. You just do you, let 'em wonder, and dare 'em to keep up."

"Keep up with what?" Tanner asked as he joined us from the side.

J.D. met my eyes again and smiled. "If she decides to stop being so good and just does what she wants. With us, I mean."

"Shit," Tanner laughed. "I'm not gonna dump her if she ends up holding your hand - or kissing you."

"But people will talk shit about you," I told him. "I mean, isn't that the problem? Isn't that why we started doing this in the first place?"

"No," he assured me. "You wanted to be my girlfriend so no one would beat my ass. If J.D. and I are cool, no one's gonna dare beat my ass, and believe it or not, I can hold my own. This thing we're doing, Cody? We're doing it because we can. Because I like these people, and I think they like me back, and it works. Fuck what those cowboys say about me. Talk doesn't hurt. Not unless I let it."

I nodded, taking all that in. "Ok."

"Which means she needs to think about it a bit," J.D. pointed out.

Tanner gave him an incredulous look. "Yeah, I got that." Then he offered a hand to me. "And now it's my turn to dance with you. Go drink whiskey, J.D. Make yourself useful."

"Asshole," J.D. grumbled, but it was with a smile.

As one man headed towards the bar, the other escorted me back to the dance floor. Tanner's hand was around my waist again, but lower and in a way that made me feel pretty. Then

he tugged, pulling our hips together before he stepped off, daring me to follow.

Just like riding a bull, I tried to remind myself. For every move he made, I had to match it. I also couldn't miss the way he was looking at me. It was sexy, sensual, and seductive. All the anxiety that had been crushing my guts into a ball began to relax, and I gave in.

This was my boyfriend. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I let my chest press up against his, and we were so close there wasn't any way I could miss his steps. When my fingers found the back of his neck, I let them play, toying with the hair there.

"I didn't see Ty," he told me as his eyes dropped to my lips. "Found my guys, though. Isaac said he's here, but this place is big, and it's pretty damned packed tonight."

"And I'm not sure I'm ready yet," I realized. "I got all dressed up, and I dunno if it was really for him."

Tanner fought back a smile. "Then who was it for?"

"My boyfriend," I decided.

He laughed. "Which one?"

So I shrugged. "I'm still figuring that out."

"Or maybe," he said, "it was for you. Because, believe it or not, that is an option too."

And that was what I needed to hear right now. That was what Ty hadn't done. This was the feeling I'd been trying to unravel all day. Sometimes, I was allowed to choose me, and these two men were just trying to tell me I could. They were saying that if I did, they weren't going anywhere.

The same hadn't been true for Ty, and that was why I'd dumped him. I had to hold on to that, because tonight, I was going to listen to Tanner.

I was going to choose me.

CHAPTER 46



I DID EXACTLY what Tanner suggested, and went to get myself some whiskey. The bartender wanted to give me another shot, but I made it clear I needed a glass. A big one, not some inch in the bottom of a tumbler. Tossing a twenty in his tip jar made it clear I was serious.

While I'd been out there twirling around with Cody, spilling my heart out to her, Tanner was supposed to have been doing his best to track down Ty. The problem was that this place was packed. Then again, Tanner didn't know how to find the bull riders. He'd been used to being all subtle and shit until Cody showed up.

Me? I knew. So, scanning the waitresses wandering around with their little trays, I looked for bottles. Champagne, wine, hard liquor - it didn't matter. Tonight, Ty would be nursing his pride, and that meant a lot more than a few fun drinks. He'd also have some friends hanging around him, and they'd feel the need to keep up. Kinda like the financial version of a pissing contest.

Then I saw it. A girl had not only a bottle of something clear, but also a half dozen nice glasses. Not the shitty plastic ones they passed out to the dollar drinkers. Nope, these were real glass. So, pushing away from the bar with my own little whiskey crutch, I made my way in the same direction that waitress was going.

A couple of girls smiled real sweet at me as I squeezed past them. A few guys shot warning looks my way. Yeah, I'd let 'em have their moment. How were they supposed to know

that I only had eyes for one girl? I was pretty sure at least one other bull rider in here had scooped a girlfriend away from her man by now. We did have a reputation to uphold, so if a jealous man wanted to glare, that was safe enough. I'd just keep on movin'.

Then I saw him. Ty had come straight from the arena, it looked like. He had on his riding shirt, the black one with the Wrangler patches up the arms. His jeans were just dirty enough to prove he was the real deal. That was all expected. The sexy little brunette in his lap was not.

But I was pretty sure I'd seen her before. Wasn't that the same girl he'd been talking to the other night? The one he'd said he was trying to ditch before his ride? Wait. Hadn't he also said he'd met her here too?

Shit.

I needed to rethink this talk we were gonna have, so I moved to the side, finding a safe spot by the wall. The whiskey was helping. It kept me from wanting to charge in there and wring his damned-fool neck.

Sure, the girl was hot. She was the kind of pretty that turned all men stupid. Her long, dark hair was loose, and Ty's fingers were playing with it absentmindedly. Her red lips kept finding his neck, kissing on him like some obedient little bitch. She was playing her part, but Ty's attention was on the man across the table from him: Emilio.

That's who paid for the bottle, and the waitress was busy passing out clean glasses and picking up the used ones. Gustavo was there too, sipping from a bottle of beer. A few tables over, I spotted more guys I knew. Jake, Austin, Jaxon, Wes, and more. It looked like the whole crew had decided to camp out on this side.

Eventually, Cody would figure that out. She'd see someone, follow him back, then stumble upon Ty and his new date for the night. Fuck! Earlier, she'd sounded like she'd been willing to give him a second chance, but once she saw this? Naw, that shit wouldn't fly.

Which was when I realized this was real. Ty was gone. Just this morning, he'd been acting like my bro, getting all cool with me and shit. He might be a fumbling dumbfuck, but I'd honestly thought his heart was in the right place. Shit, when he'd asked me about Tanner? Never mind that I'd told him all that!

We'd been Friends. I'd given him a real chance. He'd stepped up, so I'd stepped back. I'd all but moved out of his way so he'd know this was cool between us, and he'd let me think it was working! Those times he'd acted like our shit was cool, that my secrets were his, and how he'd offered to punch me for cover? He'd been one of us! He'd started to become my bro, and I hadn't never had one like him before.

I lifted my glass and took another long swallow. It wasn't helping as much as I'd thought. Fuck him for thinking he could just walk all over our girl. Fuck him for not even thinking about me when he did it! Friends didn't do that shit. Friends didn't act like none of this mattered. Friends most certainly did not turn their back on the good stuff and move on like it had never happened!

My feet started moving before my brain kicked in. If this dumbass thought he could just erase us by sticking his dick in this new girl, well, I'd make sure he got to it. The last thing I needed was Cody seeing her replacement! Like goddamned salt in all the wounds he'd left her with, and that shit was not going to be ok.

I slammed back the last swallow just as I reached the table and dropped my glass down hard enough to make the lady in Ty's lap jump. Her eyes got big at the sight of me. Ty's narrowed. Gustavo pushed his chair back, making room to escape. The only one who didn't seem to be scared of me was Emilio, but I had a feeling it was because that little fucker was quick enough to know he could get away.

"You done fucked up," I told Ty, and there was no humor in my voice.

He huffed at me, shifting his girl slightly so I could see him better. "You really wanna do this, J.D.?" he taunted.

My eyes jumped to his new lover. “You, vanish.”

“Fuck off,” she said, lifting her chin.

Well, she had spunk, I’d give her that. I also didn’t care. “You wanna be between us, then fine.” So I leaned around her. “You know she came out here tonight to talk to you, Ty?”

“I’ve been trying to get him to show up all weekend,” the little brunette informed me.

“Not you,” I told her. “The girl he really wants.”

“What?” the buckle bunny asked.

Ty waved her off, but his eyes didn’t leave me. “Yeah, she made her case pretty clear this morning.”

“Because your head crawled so far up your damned ass you made her,” I shot back, glancing over to check the table. “Someone fill up my damned glass!”

“Vodka?” Emilio asked. “*Tudo que eu tenho.*”

I nodded, getting the gist of that. Vodka was all he had. “*Está bien. Gracias.*” Now he could deal with the difference between Spanish and Portuguese. Then I looked back at Ty. “You got scared. You ran. You just forgot one thing.”

“What’s that?” Ty asked, trying his hardest to play tough, but I could see his eyes.

His pupils were a little too large. That meant he was scared. He’d seen me fuck up a few guys, and right now he was on the wrong side of things. Didn’t take a damned genius to realize I didn’t fuck around. Not now, not ever.

“I was on your fucking side!” I roared at him.

The girl on his lap flinched back, but I was pretty sure she was the only reason Ty wasn’t making more of a scene. Nope, he had to look like a real man in front of her. That was what he did, right? He cowboied up to get his dick wet. To him, nothing else mattered, so he’d take it. He’d sit there, trying his best to look like he wasn’t shitting himself right now, just so she would think he was all that.

“Fuck you, J.D.,” he shot back, all but proving me right.

And I felt my lips curling into a smile. “Yeah? That’s how you wanna play it?” I reached over for the glass Emilio had just topped up and took a long, intense drink, feeling the burn the whole way down. “Because you don’t get to fuck with my rookie. She gave you a chance.” I set my glass down and pulled in a long breath. “*I gave you a chance!*”

“This isn’t about you,” he snapped.

So I slapped the table hard enough to rock the vodka out of my glass. “It sure as shit isn’t about you anymore! You were my bro, Ty! My fucking bro. I had your back. No matter how much you fucked up, I put in a word for you, I made it all work. I was the reason you didn’t crash and burn from the start. That’s what Friends do, and you looked me in the eye and let me think we had something.”

“Yeah, and we’re not gonna have that kind of thing,” Ty huffed.

Sucking in a breath, I turned to calm myself down. I wanted to put my damned fist in his pretty little face, but I was trying to get him out of here. Sadly, turning made me realize that a few too many people were looking. A few of them were tense like they were about to rush in.

And then, through the gaps in the bodies, my eyes landed on Cody. She was pressed right up against Tanner, her arms around his neck and the two of them looked like a real happy couple. At least they did until she spotted me.

There was a sweet little smile on her lips. A sparkle was waiting in her beautiful blue eyes. That sexy little dress was swishing with each step she took, teasing me with a glimpse of her thighs. But when I didn’t smile back, her eyes shifted over to see why, and everything stopped. It took no longer than the space of a single beat of my black heart, then she saw Ty - and the girl all up in his lap.

Her feet stopped. Tanner jerked as he tried to figure out what was going on. When Cody let go of him to storm towards us, I realized I was out of fucking time. Shit was going down.

“Time to go, Ty,” I told him.

“Fuck off,” he shot back one more time. “I’m here to have a good time and forget this shitty ass weekend. I also don’t need your - “

“What the hell?” Cody demanded as she shoved through people to reach my side. Her eyes were on the brunette. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Lacey, who are you?”

“Cody.” Then she looked at Ty. “Guess you’re real broken up, huh? Took you what, eight hours to find another buckle bunny to screw over? Gonna make her feel real special too?”

“Lacey,” Ty said gently. “Hun, let me up?”

“What’s going on, Ty?” she demanded.

But Gustavo pulled an empty chair over. “I got you a place, Lacey,” he offered.

The moment the girl was off his lap, Ty stood, doing his best to look like he had this. Too bad for him, he didn’t realize he had smudges of another woman’s lipstick on his neck. If I could see it, then Cody could too.

“You’re the one who told me to get lost,” he reminded Cody. “I tried to be what you wanted, but it was never good enough, was it?”

“Do you really think treating me like that - ” she pointed at Lacey ” - is what I wanted? I’m not a fucking buckle bunny, Ty. I’m not here to get fucked!”

“You sure about that?” he taunted. “Because it sounds to me like you got fucked all weekend.”

Cody sucked in a breath. From the corner of my eye, I watched as her head twisted in one of those “you’ve gone too far” expressions women have. Behind her, Tanner leaned in. They were all too late, because Ty’s little tantrum had just gone too far and I was done with this shit.

I swung.

My fist crashed into the side of his cheek. Maybe the asshole had a few inches on me, but that had never stopped me

before. I hit him with all the rage I'd been holding on to for my entire life. He staggered, but the dumbfuck didn't go down. Instead, he lunged, shoving at both of my shoulders.

Oh, it was on.

"I will kill you!" I screamed at him. "No one talks about her like that. No one, you fucking hear me!"

"Cody, stop him!" That was Tanner's voice.

Emilio didn't even bother shoving his chair back. He simply jumped up and bolted. Gustavo moved to shield the girl. Around us, a dozen other cowboys began to move in. I saw all of it, but I didn't give one single fuck. No one messed with Cody. No one. Not even me.

I swung again, and this time I clocked Ty in the temple. He dropped to a knee, but before I could move in to kick him in the head the way I wanted, I felt the softest, most gentle touch on my arm.

Cody.

She didn't try to pull me back. She didn't need to force me around. That brush of her fingers was her way of asking, and all the rage vanished the moment I felt it. Forgetting about Ty completely, I turned to check on her, only for her to lace her fingers with mine.

"We need to go," she said. "Someone's gonna call the cops."

"Fuck, and you don't need a fine," I realized, letting her tow me towards the exit. "Tanner?"

"Go!" he insisted, but his words were for Cody. "I got him."

"We're going!" Cody insisted.

And for the first time in my life, I walked away from a fight I knew I could've won, because this woman was definitely worth it.

CHAPTER 47

TANNER



“BECAUSE IT SOUNDS to me like you got fucked all weekend.”

Those words fell out of Ty’s mouth, and I moved to put myself between him and Cody. I wasn’t fast enough, though, because J.D. was already swinging. I watched as Ty’s head snapped to the side, and the big guy staggered a step before rushing in to shove J.D. back

Yeah, but J.D. didn’t care. One glance was enough to make it clear that man had just shut off his niceness and turned on the asshole. His expression had gone cold. His eyes were even darker than normal. All his beautifully sharp edges were now on display, and Ty didn’t seem to care that he’d just woken up a monster.

“I will kill you!” J.D. bellowed at him. “No one talks about her like that. No one, you fucking hear me!”

“Cody, stop him!” I begged.

Because she was the only one who had a chance. I’d been on this wild ride of a PBR tour long enough to know that when J.D. got like this, there were only two outcomes. He won or he put someone in the hospital. And maybe a fifteen grand fine for fighting didn’t even make J.D. bat an eye, but I was pretty sure that neither Cody nor I could afford it. Never mind the bloodshed!

J.D. swung again, and this time his hit was aimed a whole lot better. Knuckles cracked against Ty’s temple. It was the kind of hit that would knock a lesser man out cold, but Ty just

dropped down to a knee. The one thing he didn't do was swing back. He didn't even make another lunge. He just took it.

Cody caught J.D.'s hand and tugged. I couldn't hear what she said, but it seemed to be the right thing. Just like that, the most terrifying man in the PBR turned into a damned lap dog, letting her lead him out of the bar, but others were pushing in.

Austin was to my right. Emilio had vanished. Gustavo had placed himself in front of Ty's latest piece of ass. Then, like they were reading my mind, my crew moved in to flank me. Isaac was on my left. Jorge put himself on my right. When Ty snarled and turned his anger on me, I knew we could clean this shit up.

Ty shoved to his feet, both hands hitting my shoulders. From the sides, bull riders pressed in. I wasn't sure if they intended to break this up or make it worse. I also didn't care. My crew had them, which meant Ty got my full attention, and I was done fucking around.

"You want a fight?" I asked him. "Really?"

"Fucking acting like you don't know what I mean!" Ty growled before shoving at me again.

So I grabbed his arm, twisted, and pushed. He tried to push back, but compared to a bull, he wasn't shit. Shoving a hand into the middle of his back, I forced his face forward, refusing to stop moving until his cheek slammed down on the table, right between a few of the scattered glasses and tipped-over beer bottles. Then I leaned in, holding him there.

"That's it!" I called out. "Fight's over."

"Go back to your drinks or your dancing," Jorge ordered.

"Last thing we want is to get the PBR thrown out," Isaac added. "Shit's done. We're cool."

"Fuck," someone grumbled. "That wasn't even a real fight."

A few others murmured their own agreement, but it seemed the staff was too busy with the overall crowd tonight to have noticed a little scuffling over in the corner. I was going

to call this a win, except for the fact that I had a pissed-off cowboy pressed down on a table, and I wasn't sure how bad he'd blow when I decided to finally let him go.

"Dumb-ass call, Ty," I grumbled.

He nodded under my grip. "Yeah. Fuck. I know."

"And?" I insisted.

"Did you shits even hear what I said?"

"That she got fucked all weekend. Slut-shaming her, really?" I snapped.

He turned his eyes so he could see me. "She got fucked, Tanner! Not by me. Not you. I was talking about her fucking scores!"

"Oh."

Then he pushed, but I just leaned a little harder, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere unless I wanted to let him. Ty growled in frustration, and his second attempt was half-hearted. Then he gave up.

So I leaned in. "She came here tonight to talk to you, and you fucking blew it. I hope this new girl is all you wanted, because your chances with Cody? Gone."

"She's the one who started this," he reminded me.

"Oh, *she* is?" I shifted so he could look right at me. "That woman is not a toy to keep you happy. She's the real fucking deal. And if you ever shove her the way you've been shoving me, I will not stop J.D. from killing you, you hear me?"

He had to try struggling again, to no avail. "Yeah, I was going for J.D., you dumb shit. I'm not gonna hit her."

"Oh, this time," I snarled.

"Any time!" he shot back.

"So you'll just make sure she hurts in other ways, hm?" I asked. "Because if you don't think you kicked her when she was down, you're a fucking dumbass!"

So Ty tried to stand again. This time, he pushed up hard enough to lift my feet, but I had this. A jab of my elbow in his back reminded him to be a good boy. It also hurt bad enough to take the fight right out of him.

“You want a fight?” I taunted. “You think you even scare me? I can do this all night long, Ty.”

He was breathing hard under me, clearly pissed, but he didn't reply.

So I leaned into his ear. “You broke her heart. She wanted to talk, maybe even to give you another chance, but this? You just lost her, Ty. She was slipping away and you gave her a nice little push tonight. Too bad for you, there's not a damned thing I can do about it.”

“I was trying to keep her safe!” he snapped.

“In all the wrong ways,” I assured him. “You wanna know how to protect her? How to be the kind of man she needs? You stand your ass behind her, ready to back her up, not fucking take over! That woman? She doesn't break. She might fall down, but she will always get back up - and then double down.”

He nodded, and his body had relaxed completely. “Let me up, Tanner.”

Slowly, I eased my weight off. Ty nodded again, and when I stepped back, he stood up, wiping something off the side of his face. He was still pissed. I was still confused, but at least I knew what side I was on. And while I'd always stand up for Cody, I couldn't make myself hate this guy. Shit, I felt bad for him.

Then Ty offered me his hand. “Truce?” he asked.

I took it, aware the crowd around us might be thinner, but wasn't completely gone. Instead, they'd returned to their tables and were trying to act like they weren't listening in. Thankfully, the music over here wasn't so loud that I had to yell. Except for Gustavo and Ty's little buckle bunny, we were basically private right now.

“What the fuck, man?” I asked.

Ty used his sleeve to wipe away the remnants of whatever alcohol I'd shoved him into. "J.D. comes over here bitchin' at me and trying to chase off Lacey. You think I'm gonna just ignore that?"

I gaped at him in complete astonishment. "Do you even hear yourself?"

"What?"

So I gestured at him. "You ignore that? Chase off your girl? You. You. You." I groaned in annoyance. "Jesus fuck, Ty! That woman came here to give you a damned chance, but you couldn't even wait a day. You couldn't even be bothered to stick around long enough to talk to her about what happened."

"She said all that needed to be said," he insisted.

"No, she fucking didn't!" I yelled. "That's the whole point. You throw things in her face, all but daring her to do it, so she does, and then you don't give her a chance to explain why? You count on the fact that she's out there doing her *goddamn*ed job to keep from having to face it. You ran, and now you're trying to look like *you're* the tough one? Fuck you. Shit, fuck all of this!"

"Wait!" Ty said, halting my feet before I could even turn away.

"What?" I demanded.

He stepped closer, but nothing about his posture was threatening this time. Instead, he was just making this chat a little more private. I glanced behind him at where Gustavo and that girl were still a little too tense. Then I looked to the side, seeing Austin grinning like this was the best shit that had ever happened.

"What the fuck does she want from me?" Ty asked. "Tanner, I tried. I figured out a way to be around her, and that did nothing but piss her off. What the fuck am I supposed to do? I tried, man. I fucking tried my heart out and all I did was fail. When should I give up?"

"When you aren't interested in the girl," I told him.

“Your girl?” he asked. “Yeah, because that’s really gonna work out in the end.”

“She was supposed to have been *our* girl,” I countered. “You just got scared of someone saying shit about you like they do about me.”

He pushed a hand across his mouth, then actually nodded. “Yeah, I am. Well, was.”

“Was?”

“Right up until she told me to get lost,” he admitted, glancing over to actually meet my eyes. “But don’t you dare think I’m gonna get in her way.”

“You could,” I pointed out.

He shrugged that off. “Not interested. She’s good. She’s damned good. She also doesn’t need me.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong,” I told him. “You made her feel like she was seen.”

“With J.D. around?” He laughed once, the kind that proved he wasn’t buying it. “Right.”

“No, *he* makes her feel invincible. You made her feel seen.”

“And you?” Ty asked.

“Fuck if I know,” I admitted. “I’m also not dumb enough to throw away a chance with a woman like that. I know I’m hitting out of my class, but I don’t give a shit. So long as she’ll give me the time of day, I’ll make sure I treat her the way she deserves.”

“Good,” Ty said. “Just let me know if she needs anything? I mean, she won’t want to talk to me anymore, but I’m still rooting for her.”

“You know what she wants?” I paused, making sure he was listening. “Respect, Ty. She wants you boys to figure out that she’s the real deal, and that’s one thing I can’t help with. I’m just the idiot out there saving all your asses. You? You’re the one people listen to, so figure out real fast if helping her

means chasing off her fans, or maybe - just maybe - it means you need to fucking do something. Not just let shit keep on happening around you.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “I hear ya. We still good?”

I had to think about that for a second. “Good might be a stretch,” I admitted, “but we’re still ok. Figure you can convince me we should be good again at some point. Granted, you really pissed off J.D., you know that, right?”

“Shit,” Ty grumbled. “I did that this morning when she turned into a bitch.”

So I turned a bit so there was no way Austin could even see my next words. “Stop and think about that. *She* turned into a bitch? Or has she been screaming all weekend about you smothering her? She just wanted your help, Ty. She’s here to ride bulls.”

“Not get ridden,” he groaned, ducking his head.

“Exactly. And that?” I leaned a bit to glance at his replacement girl.

He shoved a hand across his mouth. “I’m trying to get Cody out of my head.”

“No,” I assured him. “You’re trying to make her pay for not doing things your way. You wanted to be seen with someone else, and it happened. Shit call.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, “kinda was.”

“Thing is, now you get to live with it.” I patted his arm. “Next time, try dealing with shit instead of running from it.”

CHAPTER 48



OUTSIDE, the night air was cool. It was a drastic change from the heat of the fight we'd just left, pushing away the warm comfort of the alcohol thrumming in my veins. As the doors closed behind us, the swell of music faded away to a barely perceptible hum and the singing of crickets took over.

My fingers were still laced with J.D.'s, and I didn't stop until we were away from the door and off to the side. Cigarette butts on the ground proved this was the smoking section, but I didn't care. No one was out here right now, and I needed a little space. A bit of silence. A moment to just fucking *think!*

"Cody?" J.D. asked, pulling his hand free so he could clasp both of my shoulders.

I pushed out a heavy breath and flopped my back against the wall. "Please tell me this is a bad dream?" I begged.

"Fuck," he grumbled. "I'm sorry. It's just that he said that, and I didn't think none. I didn't mean -"

"No," I said, cutting him off. "Fucking Ty deserved to get hit. Shit, I would've let you hit him more, but I have a funny feeling that getting arrested would be a problem."

"Lil' bit, yeah," he agreed.

So I nodded, making it clear I'd heard. My mind was still stuck on what I'd seen, though. Just this morning, Ty had been talking like we were a real thing. He'd been trying to "protect" me because he liked me so much, or so I'd thought. But was it all a lie?

He'd moved his stuff out of our room. He'd cut me out of his life. He'd been here tonight with some girl, and the worst part was that she was beautiful! Not some desperate bimbo or anything. No, that girl had looked like the kind I'd always wished to be: strong, sexy, and sure of herself.

"He moved on," I said softly.

"Cody..." J.D. tried. "Look, it's what guys do. You get over a girl by getting into another, you know? And I dunno if he was sober. Don't think so."

"He wasn't," I assured him.

"Which means he was tryin' to drink you away."

That didn't really make me feel better. Drinking me away would've been ok. The girl? The absolutely stunning woman who he'd found so easily? The one who was such a good replacement that he'd have nothing to miss about me? Yeah, that one. She'd clearly been sitting in his lap long enough to suck on his neck a while. The red lipstick kisses she'd left behind were impossible to miss. Then there was the big problem I kept coming back to.

"He knows everything, J.D."

"Yep," he breathed.

"What if he decides to use that against us?" I asked.

J.D. caught my hands, stepping in close like he was shielding me from the rest of the world. "Use what?" he asked. "That you've got a couple of guys chasing you? Pretty sure there ain't no one in the PBR who'd be surprised about that."

"You and Tanner," I whispered, glancing over to make sure there wasn't a soul around to hear us.

He said nothing for just a little too long. Then, "I don't care."

"Tanner might!" I hissed.

J.D. chuckled once. "Yeah, well, what's done is done. We thought he was one of us, and I think he just proved he wasn't. Fuck him."

“I did,” I mumbled.

And that was a big part of my problem. I’d slept with Ty McBride. I’d liked him enough to do that, and I’d honestly hoped that maybe we had something real. Now, I was stuck wondering if I’d just been a bed warmer for him.

That fight we’d had last Thursday popped into my head. He’d been pissed because I wasn’t fucking him enough. He hadn’t cared about me sleeping with other guys. Didn’t all of that mean our thing had meant nothing to him? If it had, wouldn’t he have been jealous? Instead, *he’d* been the one encouraging me to mess around, have fun, and be a little wild.

Now he could use it against us. If it came out that J.D. or Tanner slept with men, then what? J.D.’s sponsors would dump him so fucking fast. Tanner? I had no idea what would happen there. Would the PBR ignore it, calling him a sign of their diversity or something? Maybe, but I was pretty sure the bull riders wouldn’t make it that easy.

No, they’d turn on him the same way they had with me. Probably more. I just had Austin and his idiot cronies to deal with. A gay guy in the middle of the toughest sport on dirt? No, that would be a good excuse for a beat down. It was the way bull riders seemed to think. At least the ones I’d known.

I felt like I was ruining everything around me. Maybe I was bad luck? For a little bit there, it had all been so good, though. I’d actually dared to hope, and now, just when I swore I had it all figured out, I felt like my dreams were all crashing down around me.

“I’m losing everything,” I said, looking up to find J.D.’s eyes waiting.

“Not everything,” he promised. “You’re still qualified. You still got Tanner. Shit, that boy was going to go after Ty too.” Then he licked his lips. “And you’ve got me. Cody, you’re my best friend. I swear I’m not going anywhere. Not now and not ever.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t help!” I whined. “If the judges keep giving me shit scores, how long will it take before I’m

not qualified anymore?”

“You came in seventh,” he reminded me.

“And my scores are going down, not up,” I shot back. “Don’t you get it? I’m not playing the same game you guys are. I ride better and I get punished for it. They want me to show my tits and ass. So long as they can crack jokes about me being a sweet little lady, then I’m ok. But when I prove I can do this?”

“They score you low,” he realized. “Fuck!”

“And I can’t beat that,” I told him. “J.D., don’t you get it? I rode better and scored worse. How can I work hard enough to make up for that? And I didn’t get any fucking sponsors! Without those, I’m just a nobody. You know that as well as I do.”

“Which is why I started getting in shit when I was a rookie,” he admitted. “No, you’re right. I just don’t know how to fix it.”

“Me either.” So I pressed my hands over my eyes, leaned my head back, and groaned out my frustration. “I feel like I’m losing everything! This was my dream. It’s all I have, J.D.”

“You have me,” he insisted.

“Well, yeah, but...”

Catching my wrists, he gently lowered my hands so I had to see him. “Don’t you fucking get it?” he asked. “Cody, I ain’t goin’ nowhere. I’m not letting you lose. I don’t know how, but I will be right here with you, and we’re gonna figure this shit out.”

“Really?” I asked. “But what happens when you start getting shit for it too?”

“Don’t fucking care,” he growled.

“But I do!” I could feel tears stinging my eyes, so I tried to force them back.

J.D. let go of my arms to cup both sides of my face. “Listen. I don’t got a lot of friends. I don’t like most people,

but I like you. That means we're not gonna quit, get me? We're not gonna let this weekend ruin this little thing we're all doing."

"And if it doesn't get better?" I asked.

"Then we'll get more pissed off, and we'll make a bigger scene," he swore. "The one thing I will not let you do? You cannot leave me, Cody. You hear me? Because the only thing I got left to fight for? It's you. You are my everything. You..." He stepped closer, his eyes dropping to my lips. "You're my fuckin' rookie."

And then his mouth found mine.

There, under stars that were hidden by neon and canopies, J.D. claimed my mouth, making it clear he wasn't trying to be gentle. He kissed me the way he rode, with everything he had, and I kept up. My hand found the back of his neck. His fingers slid back, getting lost in my hair.

Our tongues met, danced, and fought for control. Our lips slid across each other. I knew someone could come out of the club at any moment and see us, but I'd stopped caring so much somewhere around the time J.D. had thrown that punch. I just needed this.

In truth, I needed him.

J.D. had become my rock in this insanity. He was the one thing I could always count on, and when he said he wouldn't let me leave him, I believed him. I also loved it. Losing Ty hurt. Seeing that girl on his lap made me feel worthless, but the way J.D. was kissing me erased so much of the pain.

Then he leaned in a little more. Our bodies were connected, every curve of mine filling in a hollow of his. The wall behind me was solid, but so was the man before me. When I pulled, needing him even closer, he found a way to obey, and his tongue swept through my mouth, teasing me higher.

My other hand fisted in his shirt, but J.D.'s never moved. His palms held my face right where he wanted, holding me to his lips like I was a treasure he was scared of losing. This was

the way I'd wanted to be treated. This was the connection I'd longed for. This was the kind of kiss I needed, and I never wanted it to end.

I was breathing harder. He growled in the back of his throat, making it clear he approved. Our lips didn't explore, refusing to leave each other's. Maybe it was the whiskey, but I felt like something was starting to ignite in my veins, and I couldn't convince myself to stop. One more kiss, then another. Tanner was still inside, cleaning up our mess, and all I cared about was one more taste of J.D.'s lips.

Then a soft chuckle proved that we were no longer alone. "Well," Tanner said, flopping against the wall beside me close enough to brush my shoulder, "pretty sure you two aren't going to jail. J.D., let her breathe."

Which was when J.D. pulled his mouth away, but only to tip his head so our brows touched. "I was just makin' sure she knew we weren't leaving her."

"No way in hell," Tanner agreed.

"And that it's up to her if she wants people to know about this thing we're doing," J.D. added.

"It is," Tanner agreed.

Which was when J.D. finally pulled away, but only to look at Tanner. "I thought Ty was my bro, man. I thought he was gonna be with us."

"And Ty has his head so far up his ass that he's choking himself to death," Tanner said. "Fuck, and you should know that when he said something about Cody getting fucked this weekend? He meant her scores."

"Oh."

J.D. said it, but I thought it. I hadn't even considered he'd meant it like that, but it felt more like the Ty I knew. The girl in his lap, however, killed any sympathy I had for him.

"Fuck him," I decided. "He's done with me, so I'm done with him. I have you two, so why do I need him anyway?"

Tanner just reached over J.D.'s arm to push a bit of hair away from my face. "Pretty sure there's a liquor store around the corner. I'll buy a bottle of whiskey if you two wanna drink this out back at the hotel?"

J.D. chuckled. "Not only do I have a rookie who can keep up, but I've finally found a man who gets me."

"Oh, I get both of you," Tanner promised. "I'm also going to join you, but only when we're not driving."

Slowly, I nodded my head. "You two care if I kinda want to drink tonight away?"

"Nope," Tanner said, answering for both of them. "And we'll even be real quiet in the morning when the hangover kicks in."

"And take good care of ya while we're at it," J.D. promised.

I leaned forward to steal one more kiss from J.D., then turned to do the same with Tanner. "Then someone needs to buy me some whiskey."

"Now that," Tanner told me, "is sexy as hell."

CHAPTER 49



THE MOMENT TANNER turned to leave, I waved for a waitress. I should've asked for beer, but tonight I needed something harder. Taking a page from Emilio, I ordered vodka - a whole bottle. The waitress nodded nervously, her eyes jumping to the table of glasses and bottles that had been knocked around, then hurried away to get that.

“Shit,” I grumbled as I started cleaning up our mess. “You ok, Lacey?”

She was still huddled beside Gustavo, both of them a pace away from the table. “Yeah?” she said, sounding like she didn't quite believe that.

“Well, they're gone,” I promised. “You two can sit back down.”

Which was when Emilio returned. The strange thing was I didn't even care. That little fucker was a fair-weather friend, but a good one. He didn't fight. He barely spoke English. Mostly, he was just someone to get drunk with who I knew would make sure I'd find the right hotel.

But Lacey didn't seem willing to ignore what had happened. “What was all that about?” she asked.

“J.D.'s a hot head,” Gustavo tried to explain.

“And the girl?” Lacey demanded, glaring right at me.

So I pushed out a heavy breath and dropped down into my chair. “Cody.”

“What about Cody?” she insisted. “Kinda sounds to me like you got caught cheating.”

Fuck. This was not going to be easy to explain. Not with Emilio and Gustavo listening in. “No,” I assured her. “I’d been helping her out, and she got pissed at me this morning.”

“So her mentor came to kick your ass?” Gustavo asked, his tone like he was calling me out for my bullshit. Or maybe for theirs.

Lifting a hand, I scrubbed at my face. “Look, no one fucks with J.D. You think I’m dumb enough to even try? Fuck no. And J.D. will kill for Cody. He’s convinced she’s the next big thing in the PBR, and I’m not so sure he’s wrong. She’s better than you, Gustavo.”

“So why’s he pissed at you?” Lacey demanded.

“Because I was a fucking dumbass, ok?” I told her. “I thought I was being a gentleman, and those two made it real fucking clear that they don’t want my help. I pushed the wrong person away from our first female rider in the PBR, and now I’m the asshole for not respecting her.”

“And he wants in her pants,” Gustavo said. “J.D. is friends with Cody’s boyfriend. Tanner saved J.D.’s life, I heard.”

“A few times,” I agreed, not liking how this was going.

Lacey just crossed her arms. “You know, you could’ve just said you were into someone else. I honestly thought we had something, Ty, and now I’m starting to think the only reason you’re talking to me is because I’m easy.”

“It was,” I said without thinking.

I didn’t even get the chance to brace before her palm landed right on the same spot J.D.’s fist had hit earlier. Needless to say, when she turned to storm off, I wasn’t surprised at all. I also wasn’t sure whether or not I cared.

Having her sitting in my lap tonight had not made forgetting Cody any easier. Then seeing Cody here? Damn, that dress she’d been wearing? She always said her legs were short, but they sure did not look like it to me. Miles and miles

of legs. Long, strong, sexy legs that I'd had wrapped around me just last night.

I reached for the bottle of vodka Emilio had ordered earlier, tilting it up to take a big gulp. Hopefully, it would help me forget all of this.

"You should go after her, Gustavo," I said.

"Lacey?" he asked.

I nodded. "Because someone deserves to have a good night, and it sure as shit ain't gonna be me."

And the truth was that Lacey didn't even matter. She'd been trying her heart out, and I just hadn't been into it. I should've been. She was stunning, just the kind I'd always liked before, and I'd figured she'd be willing to go home with me tonight. That had been my plan. I'd fuck Cody right out of my memories. One woman was supposed to be just as good as the next, but damned if that wasn't a lie.

Which was when the waitress came back with my bottle of vodka. I pulled out my wallet and handed her a bill, not even caring how big it was. Must've been enough, though, because the woman immediately began clearing away the mess on our table. Emilio had to lunge to save his own bottle and a glass to pour it into.

I just opened my bottle and drank straight from it. I needed a whole lot more oblivion to make tonight tolerable. I figured a little black-out drunk should do the trick. Fuck, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get Cody out of my mind.

Those blue eyes. The way she lifted her chin. The sight of J.D. Adkins right behind her like her shadow. That was what I wanted, but she'd dumped me. She was done with me. I should be moving on, and yet all I wanted was her, so if my dick refused to take control tonight, then the vodka would.

I drank - a lot.

I wasn't sure when I waved for a second bottle, but I sorta remembered Emilio and his friends helping me into a car. It wasn't my truck, and it smelled like "new car." I also couldn't make the world stop spinning. Fuck, I was drunk. So damned

drunk. Drunk enough that remembering Cody walking away from me a second time should've hurt less.

It didn't.

"I fucked up so bad," I groaned as I tried to pull myself upright.

The guy in the front seat chuckled. "Pretty sure that's what you'll be saying in the morning."

I tried to blink him into focus, but it wasn't working. The more I struggled to see him, the more I wanted to lean to the right. What I needed was another drink, but when I tried to find the bottle, it was missing.

"Where'd the vodka go?" I asked.

"Your friends kept it." It took me a moment to realize this guy was the driver. "They said it's time for you to head back to your hotel."

"Fuck," I grumbled.

"And here we are..." The car I was in slowed down as bright lights filled the back seat. "Need help getting out?"

I blew that off and fumbled at the handle. "Not dead yet. Just fucking close."

The door flopped open and I almost fell out. Somehow, I managed to catch myself. Unfolding my legs from the cramped little backseat was harder. When I turned back to make sure this guy had been paid, I almost spun in a circle, unable to control my feet.

"What do I owe ya?" I slurred.

"You're good," the middle-aged man in the driver's seat promised. "Just go get some sleep, young man."

Giving him a thumbs up - really? I did that? - I turned for the door. Behind me was dark. Inside was light. I tried real hard to make my eyes work so I could find the door, but the automatic one opened for me, helping me out. Forcing one foot in front of the other, I aimed for the brightest spot around here, smiling when I saw someone moving behind the counter.

“I need a room,” I drawled as I grabbed onto the check-in desk to hold myself up.

“Sir, are you intoxicated?” a woman asked.

“Yup,” I agreed. “I had a room, but don’t want that one no more. I need a room I can sleep in.”

“I’m sorry...” the lady told me. “Sir, we don’t have any vacancies.”

“No, but I need a room,” I insisted.

“And we had a very large event this weekend. All of our rooms are full.”

No, this wasn’t working. I’d lost my girl, my truck, my friends, and now my room? Letting go of the counter, my legs weren’t working quite good enough to hold me up, so I slid down to the floor. The tile was cold, and that helped.

“Shit,” I mumbled. “You gotta have a room.”

From the other side, the woman squeaked in surprise, and I heard her shoes clicking as she hurried around to check on me. I wanted to tell her I was ok, but I wasn’t. Nope, I was fucked. So damned fucked, and I had no idea how to fix this, so I’d just stay right here for now.

“Sir? Sir!” I saw little black heels, then the lady crouched down to pat my face. “You can’t stay here, sir.”

“I think I left my truck at the bar,” I realized.

“Which was probably a good idea,” she told me, “but that doesn’t mean you can stay on the floor, and we don’t have any rooms. Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to - “

“Ty!”

I knew that voice, so I rolled my head to try to see who it was. “What?!” I barked.

“What the fuck, man?” A pair of boots moved beside the heels. “I got him, ma’am.”

“We don’t have any vacancies, sir, and he’s saying he needs a room. I don’t want to call the cops on him, but...”

“He’s drunk enough to forget where he is,” the man in boots explained. “I have a room, and he’s staying with me.” Then he pulled at my arm. “C’mon, Ty. You have to help a little.”

“Jake?” I asked, finally figuring out who this was.

“Yeah, get your ass up,” he told me. “You want your fans to see you lying on the floor of the hotel lobby?”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Oh.”

So I pushed a bit, and Jake pulled at my arm until I was standing again. The nice lady tried to help, and I felt her hands nudging me around, but damned if I could make my eyes work right. All I knew was that Jake draped my arm over his shoulders and all but hauled me towards the elevator.

“You gonna puke?” he asked.

“Nope.” I hoped that wasn’t a lie.

Then things started moving. Sideways, upways, and overways. I couldn’t keep track of all of it, but like a good man, Jake tugged me along. I just wished it was anyone else. Fucking Jake Cunningham?

“Did you fuck Lacey?” I mumbled at one point.

“Who?” he asked.

“Hot. Brunette. She was in my lap.”

“When Cody showed up,” Jake said, proving he’d been there too and reminding me why I’d drunk so much vodka in one sentence.

“Fucking Cody,” I groaned. “Man, why’d she have to leave like that?”

“Yeah...” Jake murmured. Then I heard a door click. “Ty, you need a cold shower.”

“Need a bed,” I told him. “One without her in it.”

“Uh huh...” We were moving again.

“And I need to forget her. All about her. I tried so fucking hard, and it weren’t good ‘nuff. Nope, she tells me to kick rocks, and then she wears that dress? Fuck!”

“Ty?”

“And I tried to fuck Lacey. Well, I was gonna try to fuck Lacey. Lacey wanted me to fuck her, but then there was Cody, and Lacey’s hot, but she’s not Cody, so I - ” Jake’s arm left, my world tilted, and the next thing I knew, I landed on the bed.

“Ty!” Jake said again. “What happened to your room?”

“Cody’s in it.”

There was a sound. A groan? Moan? I wasn’t sure, but Jake made it. “You’re fucking Tanner’s girl? Are you fucking stupid? Messing with the bullfighters?”

“Tanner’s cool.”

“He won’t be so cool if he knows you’re fucking his girl.”

I chuckled and did my best to kick off my boot. “They said he’s gay. He’s not. He’s good to her. J.D. will kill for her - “

“And was willing to kill you tonight,” Jake pointed out.

“Mhm,” I agreed, working on my second boot. “So I need a room, and the girl said there aren’t any.” My boot thunked when it hit the floor.

“Just...” Jake sighed. “Go to sleep, Ty. If you puke, make it to the bathroom, ok? Can you at least do that?”

I grunted, trying my hardest to open my eyes and look at him. “Why you in my room?”

“You’re in mine,” Jake told me.

“But you steal my girls. You’re my arch-neblesis.”

“Nemesis,” he corrected, “and I’m not. Ty, shut the fuck up and go to sleep.”

“Mmk.”

I stopped trying to see him, stopped trying to make the world slow down, and stopped worrying about anything else. That was when the first tear slipped out, and I didn’t give a

shit. She'd come to the bar. She'd been there to talk to me, which meant she'd been willing to give me another chance, but I'd done the same dumbass shit I always did. I'd had some bimbo on my lap, doing my damndest to think with my dick as if I was better than her.

I didn't worry about blankets. I gave exactly no shits about comfort. I simply rolled onto my side and let my eyes leak out like they wanted to. I'd met the perfect girl, and I'd fucked it all up. I'd let her slip right through my fingers. I hadn't been man enough to be what she needed, all worried about what the guys would think, and now I was back to rock fucking bottom.

I was alone.

That was my last thought before my dreams took me. Like everything else, they were filled with Cody. Her and J.D. Her and Tanner. Her riding a horse through a field. I wasn't in a damned one of them, but she was everywhere and all I could think of. Her, my girl, the one I'd let get away.

CHAPTER 50



A SOUND MADE CODY VANISH. I tried to ignore it, needing a little more of her, but the damned noise just wouldn't go away. Something groaned. A moment later, a pillow crashed into my shoulder. That was when I pulled my eyes open, realizing the noise was my phone, and it was still in my pocket.

I pulled it out and swiped just before it went to voicemail. "What?" I demanded.

"Good morning, cowboy!" It was Doc Stephens. "I take it you had a wild night last night, but let me get you to verify your name so I can give you some test results."

"Ty McBride," I managed to get out.

"Thank you, Ty," Doc said. "And I am happy to report that your sexually transmitted infection screening came back negative. In other words, you're clean. Means you four can start doing whatever it is you want to do."

"Fuck."

"Ty?" Doc asked.

"No. Thanks," I told him. "All good, Doc. Your timing just sucks and I have a hangover."

"Just once, you boys should try drinking a little less," he taunted. "You might be surprised at how well it prevents those."

"Asshole."

He laughed. “Maybe one day the suffering will convince you to sober up. Least I can hope. Now, any chance your friends are close by?”

“Not today, Doc,” I told him. “I’m in a bed all alone.”

“Ok, then I’ll give them a call. Keep doing what you’re doing, Ty. It seems to be working.”

Then he ended the call, so I sat up. I was awake now, but confused. This room looked a lot like the last one I’d been in, but the colors were just a little different. More green, I thought. Even more confusing, the clothes on the floor were a man’s. The bags on the dresser weren’t any I’d seen before. Trying to figure out what was going on, I looked over at the bed I wasn’t in.

I remembered part of last night, but it stopped before I’d finished that bottle of vodka. I was pretty sure there’d been a second because I had patchy memories of drinking myself stupid with Emilio. Granted, the fact that I was safe in a hotel proved Renato had been right. Emilio was a good wingman, even if we couldn’t hold a decent conversation.

But my inspection made it clear someone else was here. He’d pulled the blankets up over his head, so I had no idea who. One thing was clear, though. That was where the pillow had come from, since one was missing from that bed.

Well, regardless, I smelled like shit and felt worse, so I needed a shower. I vaguely remembered someone picking me up in the lobby - it was in bits and pieces, but I knew it had been a bull rider. I would’ve said Renato, but he wouldn’t be back on tour until next weekend.

So I headed for the bathroom. One long piss and a very hot shower later, I realized I had nothing. My truck was still at the bar, and my bags and gear were locked inside it. I’d cleared out of Cody’s room last night, skipping the awards to make sure no one could stop me.

I didn’t want to wear the same clothes, but I had no other option. Pulling on my jeans from last night, I crumpled up my

riding shirt and walked out of the bathroom to an arm holding a t-shirt in my face. It was attached to Jake.

I groaned.

Of all the people to pick me up when I'd hit rock bottom, of course it was Jake. Fuck! If this weekend could get any worse, I couldn't imagine how. I also really didn't want to bitch about it and set off Murphy's Law, so I said nothing.

"Your shirt stinks, you're probably hungover, and I need a shower too," Jake informed me.

"Right," I said, taking the shirt.

"Sounded like you were talking to Doc Stephens a sec ago?"

"Yep."

Jake just nodded, leaning his shoulder against the wall. "Ok, so that's not something you want me to know. Gonna bet you'd also rather I forgot everything you said last night about Cody. Making a real wild guess I definitely shouldn't bring up Tanner's name, right?"

"Fuck." I pushed past him, deciding I should get my boots and get the hell out of here.

"And your truck is back at the bar," Jake went on. "If you let me get clean, I'll give you a ride to get it. You can even come back and change into jeans that aren't covered in bull if you want."

I spun back to face him. "Why the fuck are you helping me?"

"Because last night, you were at rock bottom." He lifted a brow, daring me to deny it. "Because whatever happened isn't as private as you wish. How much do you remember, Ty?"

"Too much," I grumbled.

He nodded. "Ok, well Cody, J.D., and Tanner showed up. Half the Tough Enough series saw you take a hit and not throw one back. A few of us heard some words being thrown around about you and Cody. Means there's a story, Ty, and it would've

only gotten worse if you'd been hauled off to jail for public intoxication last night."

"Shit." I dropped down to sit on the foot of the bed. "I'm so fucked."

"Lawyer type?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Girl with a crazy boyfriend type."

Jake smiled. "Which one?"

That was enough to make my head snap up. Sadly, that made my brain throb. "What?" I demanded.

"I know you're talking about Cody," he assured me. "The question is if 'crazy' means Tanner or J.D."

"J.D.'s not her boyfriend."

"You think he knows that?"

"You forget about Tanner?" I shot back. "Pretty sure that if there's anyone who can match J.D., then it's the one guy who takes more hits."

"Good point," Jake agreed. "So then why was J.D. ready to kill you last night?"

I grunted, turning my attention on the t-shirt in the hopes that Jake would give up and go take his shower. Instead, the guy smiled knowingly.

"Ok, so how about I try this another way," he said. "I'm not your arch-nemesis. I don't fucking steal your girls. You do a damned good job of losing them on your own, but when they come to talk to me, I don't push them off."

"Yeah," I said. "Trust me, I'm getting a real good crash course on how shit I am with the ladies."

"I also know you were sharing a room with Cody," he went on. "Before you think about throwing a punch for that, know that *you* told me last night. Thing is, that little scene with you and the crazy crew? Well, a whole lot of people got a nice front-row view of it."

"Like who?" I asked.

“Austin,” he said. “Jaxon was there. A few of the Brazilian guys, some of the Aussies. You had all the bullfighters ready to make you pay. Figure that’s going to suck next weekend in Iowa.”

I found a chair and dropped my ass into it. “Fuck. Any more shit you wanna drop on me?”

“What happened, Ty?” he asked. “C’mon, you know as well as I do that stories are going to start flying. You might as well come clean now.”

I just huffed a laugh. “Trust me, all the stories are wrong, and I’m not spilling the truth.”

“You fucking Cody behind Tanner’s back?”

“Nope.”

“You fucking Cody?” he asked next.

I looked up to find the asshole smirking at me. “You think she’s some kind of slut or something?”

“I think there ain’t a damned guy on this tour who knows what the word ‘faithful’ means, so I’m assuming she’s the same way. Considering that girl’s as tough as anyone else in the Tough Enough series, I think she’s earned the right.”

All I could do was shake my head. “Well, I got bad news for you, Jake. There are a few people who are faithful. No, I’m not one. Tanner is, though. Cody is.”

“And J.D.?” he pressed.

“Do you really think Tanner would be ok with J.D. spending so much time with her if he thought his girl was fucking the guy?” I lifted a brow, daring him to say yes.

Jake shrugged like it didn’t matter. “I think what you and Renato used to do isn’t a well-kept secret. I think a few other guys like the idea, but don’t have a damned clue how to pick up women who are into it. I think we spend a whole lot of time in the PBR praying for God to save us while sinning our asses off afterwards.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “But what does that have to do with shit?”

“And you’re not talking,” Jake pointed out. “Means that whatever went down was bad enough for J.D. to lose his shit, but not bad enough for you to spill the beans.” Then he smiled. “Which makes me think you might be a better man than I thought you were.”

That was not at all what I’d been expecting him to say. When he started grilling me, I’d assumed he was looking for a little dirt to pass around. Considering that Jake was the guy who’d told J.D. when Austin started telling people Tanner was gay?

Yeah, this guy was up to something, and I wasn’t quite sure what it was.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I asked. “You let me crash in your room. Why?”

“Because I had a spare bed, and you were embarrassing, lying on the floor like that.”

“Bullshit,” I told him.

Jake chuckled. “Yep.”

“So what the fuck are you up to?” I demanded.

He stepped away from the wall, closing the distance between us. “Why the fuck do you care, Ty? You’re going to coast through another five years or so in the PBR, making your checks by showing up, smiling real pretty, and placing just well enough to keep your sponsors happy.”

“And if you’re wrong?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Then you’ll still be chasing easy pussy every night.”

“Like you’re any better,” I grumbled.

“I’m riding as hard as I can!” he snapped.

“And that doesn’t make you give one single damn about what I’m doing, what J.D. is doing, what Tanner is doing, or even what Cody is doing.”

“She shows up and threw the PBR on its head,” he pointed out. “Or were you so distracted by her cute little ass that you

missed that part? The guys upstairs don't know how to deal with this. They can't kick her out, Ty. They don't have a fucking reason to, but if the viewers don't like her here and the tickets aren't selling, they'll find a way."

"And?" I asked.

"And if they can do that to a woman," he said, "then how hard is it to do it to a Black man? A gay one? A Muslim? How easy would it be for them to start hanging Confederate flags along the railings, calling it 'Southern pride?'"

Yeah, I didn't like the sound of that at all. Now, maybe it was because I was Canadian, so that flag didn't mean shit to me, but I knew it always went hand in hand with some damned white hoods. Even worse, Jake had a point, but I was pretty sure he hadn't seen all the problems with it yet.

"Or picking which one of us wins," I said. "Because if they can give her a score that low for a ride that good?"

"Means all we have to do is keep our asses on the bulls," Jake agreed, "and then play the popularity game. Austin keeps saying that adding a woman to the PBR is going to ruin it, but he's missing the fucking forest for the trees. Kicking a woman out of the PBR is what would ruin it. The real question is what the people in charge think."

"And none of us have a damned clue," I realized.

"Exactly," Jake told me, taking a step back. "Oh, and cold water's in the fridge. I put a bottle of Tylenol on the table. You're going to need both, and I need a shower."

Then he turned and marched into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I heard the lock click and knew I should do as he suggested. Water and pain meds would help, but I was stuck on what he'd said. Not just the part about fucking up the PBR, either. No, my mind jumped right to Cody. Because when I'd mentioned Cody's boyfriend, Jake's first reaction had been to ask which one.

If he was thinking it, then who else would do the same? How long before that rumor started spreading? Could Cody take it? Could the guys? And if the PBR had a problem with a

woman, than what the fuck would they do about Tanner and J.D.?

And more importantly, how the fuck did I stop it before it became a problem?

CHAPTER 51



TANNER BOUGHT the biggest bottle of whiskey they had. That did not mean the best, but none of us cared. Lounging around the hotel room, we drank. I bitched. J.D. bitched. And Tanner? He took care of us.

At some point, things shifted from complaints to fears. After that, it moved to kissing. First Tanner, then J.D. I knew I was too drunk to do anything more, but so were they, and this was exactly what I needed. My last thought before passing out in the middle of the bed was that while my world might be falling apart, I felt like these guys had found a way to hold me together.

The next morning, I woke up in the same place, but with a sexy man on either side and my phone ringing. My head was pounding. My mouth felt like I'd sucked on cotton. My tongue was nasty! When my phone refused to stop, I wanted to throw something, but I had to wake up first.

My eyes opened and the first thing I saw was the bull's skull tattooed right across the middle of J.D.'s chest.

Fuck the phone. In all the weeks we'd been doing this, J.D. had kept his distance, being a gentleman in his own way - until that kiss last night. My eyes shifted a little higher, finding his waiting, looking just as sleep-fogged as I felt. He didn't reach for me, didn't move in. For a moment, he simply looked, and it felt more intense than anything I'd ever experienced with a man before.

Then my phone started ringing again.

“What the fuck?” Tanner grumbled from my other side.

I rolled that way as Tanner stretched to unplug my phone, but didn't have a chance to say anything before the annoyingly loud thing was in my hands. The screen said “Max,” so I was swiping as quickly as I could. As I lifted the phone to my face, I let my eyes enjoy guy number two in my bed.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Cody!” Max greeted me.

I groaned.

Immediately, his voice softened. “Sorry,” he told me. “Hangover?”

“Like you wouldn't believe,” I croaked. “No offense, but what the hell do you want at this time of day, Max?”

“You,” he informed me. “Cody, the PBR wants to take your official photos today. That means we need you.”

“Where?”

“The arena.” He chuckled, but quietly. “I had a feeling you and J.D. would go overboard, so I wanted to give you enough time to take some aspirin, let it kick in, and get dressed. Riding clothes. Chaps and vest too. This is the set of pictures they'll use on promo materials, so present yourself exactly how you want the world to see you.”

“Which means I need makeup,” I mumbled.

“Your call,” he assured me. “Just know that you have an hour and a half to get here. No need to rush. I just wanted to make sure you're awake.”

“Thanks, Max,” I told him.

He finished up by telling me what part of that massive arena complex I should meet him at. I was a little surprised we'd be doing this there. The Monday after a show, the PBR pulled down their chutes, panels, and signs, getting ready to move to the next venue. Still, since they'd already paid for the place, it made sense to make use of it.

But once I was off the phone, I had to relay that to the guys. Not surprisingly, they were as hungover as I felt. J.D. groaned a few times. Tanner talked softly, acting like his own head was killing him. The one thing I didn't do was ask how or why we'd ended up sleeping half-dressed in a bed together.

What the fuck had I been thinking? Half-dressed? That was far too many clothes. These two? Damn, just seeing their chests peeking above the covers had me thinking thoughts my body was *not* in the shape to act on. And that ended up being the best motivation to get my ass out of bed.

"Ok, I need a shower," I told them as I went to find some clean clothes.

"Gotta piss," J.D. grumbled, shifting so he could drag himself out of the bed.

Then he sucked in a breath. Immediately, Tanner and I turned to check on him, because that sound meant pain. J.D. simply jerked his hand up from where he'd put his weight on it, then shook the offending thing.

"You ok?" Tanner asked.

So J.D. held up his hand so we could all see. "Seems I hit Ty a little harder than I realized."

The backs of his knuckles were purple. I had a feeling Ty's face probably matched. Thankfully, this was one thing I knew how to deal with. Grabbing my jeans, I pulled them on, then quickly worked on a bra under my shirt.

"Tanner, I'm gonna go grab some ice. While I shower, will you make sure he takes care of that?"

Tanner just smirked at J.D. "Still enjoying this polyamory thing?"

"Shit," J.D. drawled. "I got a hot woman who cares and a sexy man who's willing to make me behave? What's the downside again?"

That pair shared a look and I was glad I hadn't started my shower yet, because it was panty-melting. Wow, talk about some steam between them. Yep, I was dying to see things

happen there, but I didn't even know how to ask about that. Sadly, I also didn't have time to enjoy it properly if I did.

So I grabbed the bucket for ice, my key to the room, and headed out. I was barefoot and wearing a sleep tank as a shirt with yesterday's jeans. It basically looked like a walk of shame, but I didn't care. I was getting used to that being my default.

Just as I turned into the alcove for the ice machine, a door opened behind me. I looked back just to see Jake Cunningham step out of his room. He pulled the door closed, turned for the elevator, then staggered a step when his eyes landed on me.

"Cody?"

"Hey," I greeted him, getting myself moving again.

Then Jake followed me. He'd always been cool, but he wasn't carrying an ice bucket. That made me give him a dirty look.

"I just wanted to give you a heads-up," he explained. "Last night, Ty was unable to get a room here. Booked full, it sounds like. So, um..." He offered me a weak smile. "Yeah, I tossed his drunk ass on my spare bed."

"Should've left him to fend for himself," I grumbled.

"Cody, he was trashed," Jake explained. "The unable to walk kind of trashed."

"Serves him right."

Jake just reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "And his drunk ass said he didn't have a room anymore because he'd been sharing with you."

Shit. I was acting like a pissed-off ex-girlfriend to a guy who wasn't supposed to know Ty and I had been anything more than friends! Fuck. I should've started with coffee this morning. Or something!

"Uh..." I muttered as I tried to explain that away.

"All I'm saying," Jake told me, "is that fucking around with the bullfighters is a real dumb idea. Look, I don't give a

shit who you sleep with. I'm not about to judge unless you start judging me. All I'm saying is that if you're cheating on Tanner, he *will* figure it out, and you'd better have a damned good backup plan."

"No, it's not like that," I insisted.

"Which means your backup plan is J.D.," he said, nodding like he wasn't surprised.

I huffed at him. "Fuck you, Jake. Has it ever crossed your mind that I might be able to spend time with people and not fuck them? That maybe I can have friends who have dicks? That since I'm the only woman on this circuit, my options for hanging out with 'the girls' is a bit limited?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"But nothing!" I snapped, my pounding head making it much too easy to be pissed off. "When we got to Cheyenne, Ty bought the room because I'm a broke-ass rookie. Two beds, asshole."

Jake lifted both hands and took a step back. "All I'm saying is that you're playing a dangerous game with these cowboys."

"I'm here to ride the bulls," I told him. "In case you missed it, *I'm* not the one playing games."

"Which is why you're so pissed at Ty?" he countered. "That's why J.D. slugged him? And so you know, it's not often that Ty doesn't hit back. He's also not going to whine to the PBR and get J.D. fined for it."

"Oh." Because I honestly didn't know how that worked.

Jake just nodded. "And yet we all saw it. Fuck, we all heard it. Those boys were fighting over you. Doesn't take a genius to figure that out."

"And maybe you boys should figure out that I'm not asking you to. I'm not the one causing problems. It's not my fault you think of me as something to fuck before you realize I'm doing the exact same job you are."

“You gonna give that speech to every man in the PBR?” he asked.

“If I have to,” I assured him.

“You will.” Then he ducked his head and groaned. “Look, I didn’t come over to start a fight. I stopped you to let you know what’s going on because you hate the drama and bullshit as much as I do. Cody, this is just a heads-up, ok? Just trying to make sure you’re not blindsided.”

“Which means shit’s about to go down,” I pointed out.

He blew out a breath. “Yeah. Um. Austin.” Which basically said enough, yet he wasn’t done. “In case you forgot, the guys are all saying Tanner’s gay. Now, he’s suddenly the man with the hot little bull rider? Never mind that you and J.D. Adkins are inseparable? Eli said he saw the three of you heading into the same room.”

“Shared pair of rooms,” I told him.

“And I’m not here to spread rumors for you,” he countered. “This is a heads-up, Cody. Just that, nothing more. Austin’s crew wants you gone. J.D. has taken you into his crew. Ty’s running away from something, and the bullfighters are closing ranks. If you think the guys on this tour won’t notice that, then you’re not half as smart as I thought.”

“What about my scores?” I asked him.

Jake gave me a confused look. “What about them? I mean, besides that they sucked?”

“Are the judges out to get me too?” I pressed.

“Fuck if I know!” he scoffed, tensing a bit. “If you want to know that, the person to ask is Cletus. Goes back to your bullfighters, though. Those three men work like a wolf pack. They share a brain - and a sense of loyalty. You fuck with one, then you fuck with them all, and you are literally fucking with one.”

“And he’s good with it,” I reminded Jake.

“Until he figures out that you’ve been fucking Ty on the side?”

“Not how it went down,” I insisted.

Jake watched me for a very long moment as if trying to see if I’d break. I just watched back, knowing I was safe on this one. Anything he told Tanner would be fine, because I hadn’t been cheating. In truth, Tanner had come second.

Finally, Jake nodded, seeming to accept what I’d said. “Have Jorge talk to Cletus. That crazy clown knows the judges. Not that he can do anything about them, but he’ll at least be able to tell you if they have a problem with a woman on the Tough Enough series tour.” Then he stepped back. “And the only reason I’m telling you all of this is because I think the bro code applies to you too.”

“The bro code?” I asked.

He stepped back again. “Yeah. When a crazy bitch comes looking to make drama, we give a guy a heads-up to go out the back. Same shit, but the bitch is a man this time.” Then he grinned. “And I’ve decided that I don’t hate you, Cody. I don’t think you’re the problem.”

“Then what is?” I asked as he turned to walk away.

“Dunno. What I do know is that this problem isn’t mine. I’m also heading out soon, so I’ll see you in Iowa!”

CHAPTER 52



CODY CAME BACK with a plastic bucket of ice. Passing it to me, she stood there and waited until I shoved my aching hand into it. Then, with a determined bob of her head, she spun and headed for the shower. There was a little rustling around as she found the right clothes and girly stuff, and then the bathroom door closed behind her.

I smiled. I wasn't really sure why, but just seeing her morning mess made it happen. She was such a girl in some ways, and damned if I didn't like that. Opening my eyes to see her face beside me in bed this morning? It had been a lot nicer than I'd expected. The way she'd looked at me? That had made it even better.

But none of those warm and fuzzy feelings stopped the aches in my body. This weekend, I'd been stepped on, run over, kicked around, and more. Fuck, even my beard felt like it hurt, and my fist was killing me after colliding with Ty last night.

Ty.

I sighed just thinking about that mess, and Tanner heard. As I scooted up in bed to get more comfortable, he was by the dresser, digging through his bag for real clothes. The hint of blonde scruff on his jaw was cute. The heaviness in his eyes wasn't.

"You still ok with this?" he asked.

Yeah, that was a fucking loaded question. "Which this?"

He chuckled once, then began getting dressed. “Um, this-this. Me, you, her.”

Was I ok with it? Yes and no. I’d gotten my hopes up for Ty, and now I was trying to rein that shit in. None of that was Tanner’s fault, though - and it certainly wasn’t Cody’s. Still, that didn’t make answering any easier, and the last thing I wanted to do was lie to the guy I was starting to like a bit too much.

So I let my eyes close, opening them slowly and leaned back. “I dunno.”

“About which part?” he asked, snagging two bottles of water from the fridge and coming over to sit down beside me.

Damn, his eyes were pretty. Hazel, with little flecks of everything. They went with that strawberry-blond hair of his. I also liked that he didn’t start ranting or closing down. This guy just asked, letting a bit of his vulnerability hang out there for me to see. If I was honest, he was helping me figure out how to do the same, and fuck if I wasn’t trying with all I had.

“I’m pissed at Ty,” I told him. “That *fucker*! On the ride over to the arena yesterday, he was being all cool with me, askin’ about you, bein’ supportive, and shit. Then he goes and fucks it up with Cody? I mean, I told him to watch that shit. Cody spent all weekend tryin’ to tell him. I flat-out called him on his dumbass bullshit so many times! He should’ve just listened!”

“Did Ty say anything helpful before I got there?” Tanner asked. “I mean, they were doing good back in St. Louis.”

I shook my head. “I think Ty’s just about as fucked up as we are. That boy don’t have a *damned* clue how to treat a woman. He’s been using them for too long. So, it sounds like he was trying to be the guy he thought she’d want, and never once stopped to think that she ain’t looking for an easy fuck. She’s lookin’ for a partner.”

“Not a master,” Tanner muttered, nodding his head to show he understood. “And Ty probably thinks a ‘real man’ is the

one who makes the decisions, pays the bills, and all that antiquated shit.”

“Careful,” I teased. “Gets me hard when you use those big words.”

That made a smile appear on his lips. “I’ll remember that. Too bad my dick doesn’t want to work with my head feeling like this.”

Which made me chuckle, knowing the feeling. “Ok, yeah. True. There’s also a big ol’ bottle of pills in my bag and I’ll share.” He got up to get those, and I kept going, returning to the original problem. “From what Cody said yesterday, Ty was cockblocking her. That’s why he got his ass dumped; he’d decided to be her protector, and in his mind, all guys are like him, so they all wanna use the pretty little girl. And he was pushing guys away who wanted her signature and shit. Cody doesn’t do well with that.”

“And with her chasing sponsors like she is, she’s already on edge,” he agreed, returning to offer me a pair of pills.

Then he cracked open my bottle of water and held it out. With my right hand in a bucket of ice, going all numb and shit, I had to figure out how to work this backwards. Unlike Cody, I wasn’t so good with my weak arm. I tossed the pills into my mouth, took the water, then chugged back a gulp that let me swallow it all.

When I was done, Tanner took the bottle back to put the lid on again. He set that on the table beside me. It was dumb as shit, but I kinda liked that. This man was taking care of me so easily, not making me feel like a pussy or anything, but just making me feel like he saw me.

“Thanks,” I said, hoping that was enough. I also didn’t really know how to treat a guy like him, so I went right back to Cody. She was in the shower, after all, so now was the best time to get this out. “Our girl feels like she’s getting shit on. She said she’s worried she’s not playing the same game, so I’m scared she’s gonna bring up quitting next. I’m workin’ on her, though.”

“Like you’re working on me?” he taunted.

Thrusting out my lower lip, I shook my head slowly, letting my eyes run across his body. “Naw, Tanner, I don’t think you need me to fix you.”

He just lifted his chin a bit, almost like he was daring me. “Trying to say I’m perfect just like I am?”

“Kinda, yeah.” I had to swallow, because that should’ve come out more playful. “I think I’m kinda hopin’ that maybe you’ll help me not fuck up my own shit.”

He cupped the side of my face and leaned in for a fast and wild kiss. “You got this,” he promised.

“No, Tan, I don’t,” I assured him. “I’m fuckin’ makin’ it all up.”

“And you’re taking care of her,” he said. “Ever since she showed up in Tulsa, you’ve put what she wants before what you do, and I have a feeling Cody’s never had anyone do that for her.”

“Her daddy,” I reminded him.

“To a point,” Tanner countered. “Dean also wanted her to go to college, not ride bulls. So, when I say this, I want you to know it’s because of that - because you are putting Cody first, ok?”

Shit, that sounded bad. Like real bad. “Ok?” I asked.

“I’m going to spend the morning with her. I figure I’ll take her to the arena for her pictures so she doesn’t need to drive your monster with a hangover. Means I get some time with her. The alone kind.” He paused to lick his lips. “Then I’m gonna get a ride to Iowa with the guys.”

“Why?” I asked.

He leaned back, his eyes searching my face for a reaction. “It’ll give you a couple of days alone with her.”

“You’re backing off?” That didn’t make any sense. “No. With Ty leaving her high and dry like that, then him moving on so fast? She’s not gonna take that well.”

“Not backing off,” he clarified. “I’m sorting out some shit with my guys, making sure we’re all on the same page so I can give her my full attention. Well, that’s my story - and what you’ll tell Cody if she asks.”

“And the real reason?”

He smiled. “Because you’re a fucking chickenshit. You’ve been throwing Ty at her, and me at her, but never yourself. I think you need a few days to step up, romance the pretty little cowgirl, and make it clear that you are so much more than her mentor.”

My head dropped to my chest, and I couldn’t stop the laugh. “Busted.”

“Oh yeah,” he agreed. “The unstoppable J.D. Adkins is terrified of making a move with his rookie? Not really what you want the guys to be saying.”

“Kinda scared of makin’ a move with you too,” I said softly, glancing up to see how he’d take that.

Tanner made a face, then glanced away. “Um, you need to know one thing about Iowa.”

“Your home show,” I said, proving I already knew that.

“And my folks don’t know I’m anything but a good, straight man.” He paused, looking up at me. “My dad...”

“Not cool with it, huh?” I realized.

He shook his head like he was agreeing with my statement. “He’d fucking kill me. Queers, going to hell, and all that. I dunno about Mom. She says about the same stuff, but she’s not as pissed about it. I keep hoping she’ll be one of those who is ok if it’s her son, you know?”

“And she doesn’t need to know,” I reminded him.

“They’ll be there,” he said. “J.D., that’s the thing. Every year, my parents show up in Des Moines, make a fuss, and want to do dinner one night when I’m not working. They grill me about my future, if I’ve met anyone, and those things.”

I turned on the bed so I was facing him better. “I bet they’d love Cody.”

His eyes narrowed. “Well, yeah, but...”

“And we’re friends,” I assured him. “I tried to kick your ass for hitting on her, you kicked a little back, and damned if I wasn’t impressed that you’d stand up for her. We got to be friends, and you’ve saved my life a time or two, and I know it. Tell ‘em she and I are best friends. That’s all your folks need to hear.”

“Any of it true?” he asked.

I smiled. “Well, you weren’t kickin’ my ass. Pounding, maybe. The rest is.”

He barked out a laugh. “Ok, good point.”

“I get it, Tanner,” I assured him. “Promise. I fuckin’ get it. The hardest coming out is always to our parents. Telling friends? Lovers? That shit’s easy by comparison. But our parents? Naw, my mama always knew, and I still froze up when she met my first guy. So you be the sweet boyfriend to our girl. I’ll be the annoying ‘best friend’ of hers that’s all up in her shit, keepin’ you on the up and up.”

“And behind closed doors?” he asked.

“Me, you, her,” I decided. “We might be a couple of fuckups, but that girl’s worth fuckin’ up for, right?”

“And you,” he said.

Which felt good. Damned good. The shitty thing was that I didn’t have any of his sweet and smooth moves. I sucked at this flirting shit. I knew how to be real blunt, and this guy wasn’t looking for me to tell him shit he already knew. So I opened my mouth and just fumbled.

“I like you,” I said, feeling a wall of nervousness slam into me, making me feel like I was back in middle school. “I like that I can talk to you, even when I’m not real sure what I should say. I like that you’re ok with Cody. Me and Cody, you and Cody, and just her. I dunno, Tanner. I just like how this

feels, but I don't have a damned clue how to be a good boyfriend. Not to you. Not to her.”

“And yet you're doing it,” he promised. “So does that mean we're at the boyfriend stage?”

“Maybe?” I asked, hoping he'd try to talk me into it.

Tanner just chuckled. “Which means yes.”

Ok, yeah. I liked that subtle arrogance of his even more. “Yes, boyfriends,” I agreed. “Cept I'm supposed to take you out on a date.”

“Fuck,” he laughed, making it clear he did not agree. “No dates for us. That's a nightmare waiting to happen. Never mind that you have your damned name plastered on your truck. No, we're not doing that.”

I looked at him for a little too long, because that stung. He may have said it gently, and to him, maybe it was a joke, but not to me. I liked this guy. Shit, I liked him almost as much as I liked my girl, but he didn't want to date me? I just had to figure out why.

“You don't wanna be seen with me?” I asked.

“No, I told you this before,” Tanner said gently. “J.D., I think getting outed while in the PBR is a real bad idea. I think I love my job. Pretty sure you aren't looking to lose your sponsors. So long as that stays the same, then no dates. Besides, I kinda like this.”

“This?”

He nodded. “Having you all to myself, willing to talk to me, and not trying to play the PBR's bad boy while everyone fawns over you. Yeah, this.”

“I used to talk to Ty like this,” I told him. “I thought that dumbass was truly ok with all of it. Like, he was tryin', and I guess I kinda got my hopes up.”

“He's straight,” Tanner reminded me.

“Fuck, I know that,” I assured him. “Don't mean I didn't want him as a Friend. Like a bro, you know? More than a

friend. And I'm just..." I paused, realizing I shouldn't be talking about this. "I mean, I'm not sayin' you're like that. But I like that you're a Friend too."

"How many friends do you have?" he asked.

"Two," I said. "I used to think it was one, but Max kinda rubbed my nose in it. So yeah, Cody and my rep. I mean you, but you're kinda more too."

"Definitely a friend," Tanner promised. "The kind of friend who is going to make sure you do a whole lot more with Cody than just be her pal. I'm serious, man. If I have to, I'll spend all week in that RV with the guys, so you'd better shoot your shot with her."

"Fuck," I groaned. "I'm gonna fuck this up so bad."

"Not really," he assured me. "See, Ty just left her hurting. Having you step up, even if you're a dumbass about it? J.D., just make her feel pretty. Kiss her a little. Shit, if you think I missed the way you two were looking at each other when her phone went off? No, I saw that, and she won't forget it."

"You think she's actually into me?" I asked.

He actually laughed. "I think she's so focused on having to fight for what she wants that she's never even considered she's being chased. Yeah, I think she's into you - fuck, look at how she kissed you! - and I'm willing to bet she's the kind of girl who'll convince herself that being casual is all she'll get unless you make a fucking move." He grabbed my arm hard enough to get my full attention. "So make a move. A dumb one. A smooth one. Doesn't fucking matter. Show that girl you're in love with her - show, J.D., not say - and I think she'll make you the happiest man in the world."

"And you?" I asked.

With a smile toying on his lips, he shrugged. The look was a little mischievous. "I think I like watching you two figure it out. I'm also used to being the underdog. Gives me a chance to show off when I need it most. Besides, I already got the girl. You're the one who needs to catch up."

And that was when the water in the shower shut off, making me too chickenshit to even reply - but he was right.

CHAPTER 53



WHEN CODY WAS DONE, she looked *good*. Her eyes were dark, making the blue color stand out. Her hair was curled and loose. Under her black Resistol, it was sexy as sin. She'd also pulled out a new belt with all the rhinestones on it, but her chaps and vest were still in her hands.

“You ready?” I asked her.

“You’re really going to hang out at the arena while I get my picture taken?” she asked, because I’d already warned her I was coming along. She just couldn’t believe it.

“Cody, it’s fine,” I promised. “I’m also going to stop by sports med and see if those STI results are in.”

“Should be,” J.D. said. “I had my phone on silent, so I missed a call from Doc. Haven’t called him back yet.”

“Do that,” I told him as I tilted my head for Cody to lead the way.

Together, we headed out. I slipped an arm around her waist, and she leaned in. That was enough to make me puff up just a bit. It was silly. All the guys on tour knew she was with me. Hell, I’d made a damned fool of myself to make sure of it, but feeling her get closer like she honestly was into this? It had an effect on a man.

But when we got into the truck, she moved her gear out of the way, then turned to watch as I drove. What I didn’t expect was for this girl to be just as blunt as J.D. I should’ve, but her question caught me completely off guard.

“So you and J.D. are official now?”

“Uh...” I huffed something kinda like a laugh. “Yeah, um, I think so.”

“Sounded like it when I was in the shower,” she said. “Oh, and so you know, the walls aren’t that thick.”

“So you heard everything?”

She turned back to look at the road, but there was a little smile on her lips. “No, but I heard some. Ty.” Her smile faded. “And you saying you’re riding to Iowa with the bullfighters.”

“And did you hear why?” I pressed.

“So you can work things out with them?” Her tongue darted out over her lips. “And to give J.D. a push.”

“Mostly the latter,” I assured her. “I think you both need some alone time, and I’m being a good boy to cheer you two on.”

“But does he...”

“Oh, don’t even,” I groaned. “Yes! Oh my god, *yes*, Cody. He’s into you. You’re into him. He’s got a crazy nice dick, is a little wild in bed, and you know he’ll treat you right. The two of you!” I grunted, making it clear what I thought of their insecurities. “Too much alike!”

She actually giggled. “Ok, good point,” she relented. “Tanner, I’m just scared I’m going to fuck something else up. I mean, I feel like I’m a bad-luck charm.”

“You’re not,” I promised. “Ty’s an idiot. He fucked up, and I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself.” I glanced over to make sure she heard that. “*Proud*, Cody. Don’t get me wrong, I like Ty. If you decide to give him a second chance, I promise I’m not opposed. Just putting that out there so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“No, I’m good,” she assured me. “I know that type of bull rider a little too well.”

I murmured, knowing exactly what she was talking about. “And the judges were assholes this weekend. Here’s the

problem with that. So long as you stay on for eight, they can only do so much. And if they're cutting your scores down that far, well, the bulls are taking a penalty too. Pretty sure it won't be long before stock contractors are complaining."

"Because of the Unleash the Beast competition?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yep. There's big money on the line for the top bull. Right now, Disco Breakout, Without Ado, and Speed Bump are all up there in the running for it. So don't let them rock you, Cody. That's what they want. They're trying to show that you're too much of a girl, too soft, too emotional, or things like that. They want you to give up, so don't."

She nodded, letting me know she'd heard me, but she didn't reply. Just from the way she'd pulled her legs up under her, I could tell this was all getting to her. I also didn't blame her. Being the first at something wasn't easy. Blazing a trail was a good way to have everyone focus their best attempts to knock her down.

We arrived at the arena sooner than I really wanted. I angled the truck to the wrong side of the parking lot, right beside one of the many entrances. This was the building they'd told her to head to, and there was no reason for her to walk the whole way here from where I'd put the truck.

"Hey," I said. "Look tough, Cody Lane."

The sound of her middle name made her roll her eyes, but I was hoping it would also be a little bit of a reminder. Her father had named her for the two best bull riders in history. She didn't need to be soft and sweet. She needed to prove she was better than her own name.

"You going to be in sports medicine when I'm done?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'll probably head over and watch you glare at the camera the way the guys do. Make faces to see if I can get you laughing. Maybe even talk the photographer into giving me a copy of one to keep in my wallet like a very whipped man."

“Tanner!” she groaned, but it was around a laugh. “Ok, fine.”

Then she leaned over and kissed me quickly before getting out. I waited while she collected her chaps and vest, then kept the truck in place until she was all the way inside. Maybe it was stupid, but this was the closest I could be to a good boyfriend, and I needed a bit of a refresher on that.

I hadn't been with a girl for a very long time. Not fucking, but actually dating. Not since high school, if I was honest. Not since before I ran off to become a clown in the rodeo, which definitely sounded like some kind of fucked up country song.

But once she was gone, I parked J.D.'s beast of a truck in a place it wouldn't draw too much attention, then headed to find the Doc. If I was honest, it wasn't just our test results I wanted to know about. I was kinda hoping Anthony would be around to give me a couple of pointers. He wasn't quite as limited on what he could talk about as Doc.

When I reached the metal doors that blocked off our treatment area from the rest of the world, I half expected it to be empty inside. Instead, Anthony was in the main room, but the chairs were still set up, and he had an armload of physio bands.

“Tanner!” he greeted me.

“Hey, man,” I said. “Doc around?”

“Yep, just kicked out a patient.” Then he raised his voice. “Hey, Doc!”

“In here!” Doc Stephens called back.

So I slapped Anthony on the arm and headed that way. When I ducked around the corner, I found the head of sports medicine packing away all of his tools into crates. Not boxes, but actual plastic-type crates for hauling it all across the country.

“Pretty sure we missed your call,” I said by way of greeting.

He looked up, then smiled. “Yes and no,” he admitted. “I got two of you, then had some Monday-morning patients show up. You boys always manage to bang yourselves up on the weekend. Almost like this sport might be hazardous or something.”

“Or something,” I agreed. “So, is this a close the door and break the bad news moment?”

“You’re clean,” he promised.

“And Cody?” I asked.

He gave me a weary look. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“I’m just hoping her last boyfriend - I mean before Ty - didn’t give her something.”

“What?” Doc asked.

“The guy fucked her over bad,” I started to explain, but Doc waved me off.

“No, I know about that. What do you mean about Ty?”

“Oh.” So I dropped into the closest chair. “Yeah...”

Which was when Anthony poked his head in. “Doc, you ready for me to - ” Then he paused. “Sorry, Tanner.”

“No, you’re good,” I assured him.

“I was going to start packing the icing chairs,” Anthony explained.

“Yeah, I think we’re good,” Doc assured him.

So I kept going, because I didn’t honestly care if Anthony heard about our drama. I trusted the guy. He’d kept my secret this long, so I had no doubts about him doing the same for Cody and J.D.

“Cody dumped Ty,” I said.

Which made Anthony not just pause, but bend his back as he reversed to make sure he’d heard that right. “What? Cody and...”

“Ty, and J.D.,” I told him. “I mean, Ty was doing a good job of picking up Cody when Austin tried to tell everyone I was gay. She got it in her head to be my beard. I convinced her we work. J.D. convinced me he might even be serious. And to top it all off, those two are circling each other like soulmates destined to collide.”

Anthony just bobbed his head a few times. “Well, damn. Good for Cody.”

“And Tanner,” Doc added.

“Well, yeah,” Anthony said. “But we all know Tanner’s a stud. He just forgets that himself. I mean, girls go crazy for adrenaline junkies, right?”

I gave him a tired look. “No, I’m not asking you out, Anthony. I have a boyfriend and a girlfriend.”

Which made my friend roar out a laugh. “Yeah, that’s kinda what I needed, man.”

“But back up?” Doc begged. “She broke up with Ty?”

“Sunday morning,” I explained. “I guess he got a little possessive, trying to run off her fans. She warned him, he doesn’t know how to deal with a girl like her, and yeah. J.D. punched him in the face last night, things almost blew up, and now it’s just the three of us.”

“Well, ok then,” Doc said. “I also gave Ty his results this morning. Now I feel like a dick.”

“Serves him right,” I promised. “Trust me, Doc. He needs to feel a bit of pain right now. Only way he’ll ever pull his head out of his ass.” Then I turned to Anthony. “And why are you having a bad day?”

He blew out a breath. “Patients,” he grumbled. “A certain N-word using one, and his friend who keeps wanting some pills.”

“Opiates?” I guessed. “Hooked?”

“Party,” Anthony said.

“No names,” Doc warned the big Black man.

Anthony just flashed him a smile. “You think I’m a dumbass, Doc? I also know Tanner’s the one who’ll be picking them up so we don’t have to patch them up. Think of it like associated medicine.”

“Keep telling yourselves that,” Doc joked as he waved us out. “And let me pack my hospital up!”

So I pushed myself to my feet and gestured for Anthony to lead the way. When we reached the main room again, Anthony glanced back, checking we were alone. Then he lowered his voice and began disassembling the icing chair before him.

“So,” he said. “I figured you would’ve seen Austin on your way in. You literally just missed him. Came in to get that old shoulder injury of his looked at, and he brought one of his flunkies with him.”

“Which one?” I asked. “He’s got a few.”

“Derek,” Anthony grumbled.

“Who was asking for pills,” I realized. “Yeah, that actually doesn’t surprise me. I can even see that dumb fuck trying to ride high.”

“Might make him better,” Anthony joked. “But I’m so tired of the racial slurs as a way to look tough. Shit, there wasn’t even anyone around to hear that fucknugget whine!”

“Your shit hurts,” I reminded him.

“So does the N-word,” he countered. “And they can say no. When they come begging? Yeah, no sympathy. All I’m saying is that I’d refuse to touch him if it wouldn’t get my ass fired.”

“Put in a complaint,” I suggested.

Anthony just shook his head. “Believe it or not, I actually like this job. I also approve of your partners, so you know. J.D. has always been cool with me. Cody? She’s like a whole mouthful of sugar type of sweet.”

I laughed, waving him down. “She is and she isn’t. She’s nice, but she’s also a lot more like J.D. than you can imagine.”

“I remember her first weekend when she busted her nose,” he said. “That girl didn’t whine at all when Doc checked it. Her eyes watered, but a nose injury? Not surprising. Then she got up, headed out, and rode again the next day like nothing happened.”

“You see the bull try to send her flying?” I asked. “She was six feet off the ground and never once complained about the pain from that hit. That’s why the boys hate her, you know.”

“And they do,” Anthony told me. “Austin and his friends are the loudest, but not the only ones.”

“How many?” I asked.

He just shook his head at me. “I dunno, man. What I can tell you is that most guys don’t give a shit about her. They want to fuck her, but these kids are just hoping they can get their dicks wet with anything. Still, maybe ten guys? And I’m talking about a range from grumbling about her beating them, not being fair and shit, all the way through chasing her out.”

“Who’s the worst?” I asked.

“Austin,” he said. “Without a doubt, it’s Austin, and I think that man is convinced she’s going to ruin the sport.”

Then something he’d said earlier hit me. “Wait, you said Austin just left?”

“Yeah, him and Derek. They were joking about picture day or some shit. I didn’t want to know. Why?”

“Fuck,” I breathed, realizing I was a goddamned fool. Turning for the doors, I called back, “Because Cody’s getting her official PBR photos done today. I gotta go.”

I didn’t wait to hear his reply. If Austin was looking to fuck with Cody, well, this would be the perfect time, and I was the one who’d left her alone. Deep in my belly I could feel that ice starting to grow. The one that came when shit went bad. The feeling that only adrenaline could push away, and right now, I didn’t have any bulls to play tag with.

CHAPTER 54



TANNER DROPPED ME OFF, and I passed a security guard sitting in a folding chair beside the exit. He sat up for a split second, then saw the chaps draped over my shoulder. Offering me a weak smile, the man nodded, granting me entrance.

Max said the room I was supposed to meet him at was in the middle of this conglomeration of buildings. I had a simple map that I'd found online which showed me the halls I needed to take. In theory, it was a pretty simple path. Long, but simple.

But the crowds were gone. The PBR's staff were all in the arena, tearing down the panels. I could hear the clank of metal and the voices of men calling orders, but it wasn't close. Around me, the lights were in that half asleep mode that stores liked to use to get the customers to hurry up and leave. It made the place feel a bit eerie.

And quiet. I could hear my spurs clink as I walked, and these were not the wild west type I had on. My chaps rustled against my back. The impact of my boots on the concrete floor echoed against the concrete walls.

I tracked my progress by how far I'd passed the sounds outside. A cross-hall let in the scent of stale manure. Damp straw and used shavings added a sickly-sweet smell to the bitterness of cattle. Combined with the stale sweat of however many men had been through here this weekend, it reminded me of a high school gym, and not in a good way.

I was early, which was good. The last thing I wanted to do was keep Max waiting. That man had to be a saint. He'd been so good to me all weekend, and J.D. said he didn't always show up to the events. That meant he was doing all of this just for me, so I certainly didn't want to be late.

But official PBR photos? That would be something my dad could show off to his friends. It would make me searchable online, and prove that the girl with a boy's name was not a man. Mostly, I wanted to make sure Cole knew, though. That would rub just a little salt in his wounded pride, and after my big-name friends had kicked his and his buddies' asses? Yeah, that would be perfect.

Eventually, the sound of the fence crew faded. My steps got louder. When I heard someone coming the other way, I almost got excited. I figured that meant I hadn't missed a turn. The photo area should be just a few more halls up, then over a bit.

Then Austin rounded the corner. Derek was beside him. The pair had their heads together, intent on something, but two steps was all it took for them to realize they weren't alone. Sadly, I was.

Gustavo had warned me about this. Jake had said something too. Of all the people to stumble into in the middle of a building, these two were *not* the ones I wanted to see. Their threats ranged from beating my ass to raping me, so I did the only thing any sensible woman would do.

I spun on my heel, stretched my legs, and headed in the opposite direction. Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out my phone, thinking I could just send Tanner a text and get a little backup. I had this. There was no reason for my pulse to be pounding this hard. I was ok, and it wasn't like I was some delicate little damsel in distress. I'd already proven that.

Then the steps behind me moved faster. My hat was pulled from my head. Before my mind could even catch up, I spun to face these assholes.

"Dick move!" I snapped, forgetting all about my untyped text.

Which was when Austin shoved. Not back. Not into my face. The man grabbed my arm and slung me sideways, making me stagger. My chaps and vest slid off my shoulder, splattering on the floor in the hall like they should've been liquid. My spur hit the concrete, the phone flew out of my hands, and my balance vanished. My ankle twisted just a bit, and before I knew it, I was going down.

My ass hit the floor on the left cheek. My teeth clanked together hard, but that wasn't the problem. It was the doorway on either side of me and the men moving closer! I did not want to be trapped in one of those locker room type areas with these two!

Rape. That was the word that kept spinning through my mind. Austin had threatened to rape me, and I couldn't imagine a better place than this. Too bad for him, I would not make it easy. So, scrambling to my feet as fast as I could, I began to yell at the top of my lungs.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I demanded.

“Oh, is the little girl pissed?” Austin taunted, moving in to block my only route of escape.

“If you touch me, I will fuck you up so bad!”

Which made Derek smile. “I do like it when they fight back.”

And they kept getting closer. Every instinct in my body told me to back up, but I didn't want to retreat from them. I wanted to go *through* them. I waited. I watched. When they turned to share a look, I rushed forward, but they were faster - and still in my way.

Both of them caught me, tossing me back much too easily. I'd tried to tell Ty I wasn't physically strong enough to pick a fight with one man, let alone two. Now I had no other choice, so I clenched my hands hard and braced for the worst.

“Let me make this clear,” Austin said. “If you want to make it out of this in one piece, you'll pack your shit and go home.”

“Or?” I asked. My heart was beating so hard I could hear it in my ears.

“Or we show you what happens to little girls who think they’re tough,” Derek promised. “We are going to smash your face until not even Tanner will be desperate enough to want you.”

“Give up bull riding,” Austin demanded. “Go home, marry some guy. Pop out a few fucking kids like a wife’s supposed to. Leave the men to handle this shit.”

The thrumming in my head vanished. The tingling of fear racing across my skin faded. The sounds, smells, and thoughts of anything outside this room disappeared. I could almost hear J.D.’s voice reminding me to just worry about this bull. Just this ride. Just this fight, because I would fight for my life if either of them tried to touch me.

Which was when Derek lunged. I turned, throwing a hit as hard as I could at his face. Pain flared across my knuckles, but he didn’t stop. Austin moved a second later. I felt an impact on my shoulder. That spun me partway, which let Austin crash his fist into my gut.

The air rushed out of my mouth, taking a bit of spit with it, but I wouldn’t give up. I was a fucking bull rider. The beasts I rode for fun made these guys look like nothing. I could take it, I just had to keep going, keep moving, and get my ass out of the *fucking room!*

But I’d never learned how to fight. Real men didn’t hit women. That was what I’d been told, often in the most condescending voice possible. My only advantage was that I could use both arms, but a weak hit was still weak. That didn’t stop me from trying.

I swung with my left at Austin. My right came next, aimed for Derek. Both missed, but their hits didn’t. Pain exploded on my cheek, making sparks erupt in that eye. A fist hit my neck on the opposite side. I knew I was losing, but I couldn’t quit now. I couldn’t stop.

Instead, I screamed. There were no words with it. I just roared like some insane banshee, praying someone would hear me. I swung. I kicked. I did my best to jig and dance, but the hits kept landing. My ribs. My chest. My chin. I heard my teeth clank together, stunning me for a second.

Then my diaphragm. This time, it didn't just force the air out of me. That hit was hard enough to prevent it from coming back in. My body doubled over and I couldn't stop it. Another fist landed on the back of my head.

My knees buckled.

I barely had time to get my arms up in front of my face before the kicks started. One of them stomped. The other tried to punt me across the room like a soccer ball. My entire world shrank down to moments of pain and the desperate need for air. I could feel dampness in my hair. The point of my hip hurt like it might not work. The places that hurt were quickly starting to outnumber the ones that didn't, and between my fingers, all I could see was Austin rearing back for the hardest kick yet.

Time slowed.

I noticed the orange stitching on his boots. The dirt stain on his jeans stood out. The ridge in his pants proved this was a sick turn-on for him, and I hated him even more for it. The man was getting off on beating the shit out of me, and I couldn't stop it.

But I also saw the man turning the corner, rushing into the room.

This was not the Tanner I knew. This wasn't the man who danced with bulls, teasing them for being unable to touch him. This man, the one headed straight for Austin, reminded me of something much darker and more dangerous.

He threw a punch into the back of Derek's head, then grabbed Austin's arm, whipping him around - straight towards the cinder block wall. Austin barely caught himself, getting his hands up in time to bounce off, and Derek spun to face their

new attacker. Tanner's lips just curled into a less than sane smile.

He punched. He kicked. When Derek slammed his fist into the side of Tanner's face, I swore my boyfriend didn't even notice. It was like he'd disconnected from reality, and I finally began to understand what people meant when they said that bullfighters were a little bit crazy.

I also wouldn't let him handle this on his own. Moving hurt, but I'd been through this dozens of times in the arena. Shoving both hands to the floor, I pushed myself up, making my body stop complaining and just obey.

Austin pushed Tanner at the wall. He hit, his head bouncing against the hard surface, but Tanner didn't slow down at all. One foot kicked out, pushing Austin back, and I was there to put a fist into his lower back.

The pain made him cry out. Next came a foot, and I hit the back of his knee by pure accident. It still worked. While Austin dropped a knee to the floor, Derek had to face Tanner alone. A punch was thrown, a duck avoided it. They moved, looking like some kind of uncoordinated kung fu movie, but the grunts and snarls were getting louder.

"Hit him again, Cody!" Tanner ordered.

My eyes jumped back to Austin, and I tried. Much too easily, he caught my arm, stopping the swing. I pushed, hoping to make him let go. Then I pulled, struggling to get my arm free. Austin just held on, using his grip to throw me to the floor before him.

I rolled, catching a glimpse of Tanner holding the back of Derek's head as he punched the man in the nose over and over again. But when Austin roared before his next attack, Tanner dropped the man he was beating senseless and shoved his way between me and Austin.

What came next wasn't pretty. I also wasn't sure exactly how Tanner had learned to fight like this, but he did. Grabbing Austin by the throat, he shoved my attacker back, punched him in the face, and then slammed his head into the wall.

When Austin didn't drop, Tanner did it again, this time straight on.

I heard something crack. I watched as Austin's body went limp. I could see the bloodstain left on the cinder blocks. All of that happened as I tried to get back up a second time, but it wasn't working. My world was spinning. A few too many hits to the head had me dazed, but the horror before me continued on like a slideshow.

With Austin unconscious on the floor, Tanner's entire focus was now on Derek. "You don't touch her!" he bellowed. "I will fucking kill you." Each sentence was punctuated with another hit to Derek's face.

The bull rider wasn't fighting back anymore. I wasn't sure he was really conscious, but he wasn't out either. Caught in that middle state where his body knew escape was the best option, Derek's hands tried to slap at Tanner, hitting him no harder than wet toilet paper, and Tanner's punches weren't slowing down.

Then a massive Black man shoved his way into the room, grabbing Tanner around the chest, trapping his arms in the process. Wait, that was Anthony!

"Quit!" Anthony yelled.

Tanner didn't care. He was fighting, and he wasn't about to stop. Tossing his head back, he tried to crack his skull into Anthony's face, but the physiotherapist dodged it. Caught in his bear hug, Tanner was still writhing, fighting to get himself free, but he didn't stand a chance against the much larger man's strength.

"Cody needs you!" Anthony hissed. "Tanner, stop. Breathe, man. Cody's hurt and she needs you. These two are out and I'm on your side."

"What?" Tanner asked, his body finally relaxing. "Cody?"

"Tanner?" I gasped.

This time, when my boyfriend struggled, Anthony actually let him go. Tanner rushed over the assholes he'd kicked the shit out of, not stopping until he was at my side. Then, he

shoved an arm under my legs, the other behind my back, and lifted me to his chest like I weighed nothing.

“I got you, Cody,” he promised, carrying me out of the room like I was some princess in a movie. “I got you, baby, and I won’t ever let them hurt you again.”

CHAPTER 55



MY HANDS WERE SHAKING SO HARD I could barely hold on to Tanner's neck. I could feel the tears streaming down my cheeks, but I didn't know how to stop them. It was over. I'd survived. I hadn't been raped, but for that split second, I'd honestly thought I was about to be, and I did not like how it felt.

I was weak. I was helpless. I was everything they'd said.

When we reached the hall, I saw my pink and black chaps sprawled from wall to wall. Over there was the dark case of my phone. My hat had been tossed further down, but everything was blurry. I tried to blink, but the tears just kept coming. My legs were shaking. My shoulders were trembling. I wasn't as tough as I thought, and I didn't want anyone to see me like this!

When we reached the far end of the hall, Tanner eased me to the ground, and kneeled beside me. "Cody?" he asked. "Is anything broken?"

A sob broke free, but I shook my head. That hurt, but not as much as the damage to my spirit. I was supposed to be strong. I was a goddamned bull rider, but I just wanted to curl up in a ball and make all this go away.

"Baby?" Tanner begged.

"I couldn't stop them," I blubbered.

"Oh, Cody," he breathed, cupping my face the way J.D. had so many times, then he used his thumbs to wipe at my cheeks. "I know. It's ok."

“No it’s not!” I shot back. “It’s not ok. I’m bad luck, Tanner. I’ve failed at everything. I screwed it all up, and I couldn’t even stop them on my own. If you hadn’t - “

“But I did,” he said, cutting me off. “And no one can take two against one. I don’t know if they blindsided you or what, but stop that!” Then he leaned in to kiss my brow. “You are not weak, ok? You got hit hard, and you got back up to help me. You fought the fuck back, and that is not the same as being weak!”

I heard him. I also saw the intensity on his face. Those hazel eyes of his had turned almost green, but I wasn’t scared of the anger. Not from Tanner. This sweet, sexy man had just given me a glimpse of something I had a feeling he didn’t turn loose very often, and he’d done it for me.

“Tanner?” I asked, sniffing in an attempt to stop my tears. “Are you ok?”

He just wrapped his arm around me and pulled me up against his chest. “I am now. Oh, Cody, I am so sorry I left you alone.”

“I’m not a doll,” I reminded him. “I don’t need to be babied.”

“No, you don’t. You kicked a little bit of ass yourself.” Then he leaned back to look at me. “But when I saw you on the ground...”

My next words came out as barely a breath. “I thought they were going to rape me.”

Tanner’s entire body stilled, and his gaze flicked from one of my eyes to the other. “Are you ok?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, but the sound of more steps made me look back as Doc Stephens came jogging over with a medical bag.

Anthony was still in the room with the guys. I could hear more feet, which meant help had been called in, and I could only imagine who all was about to see me in this state. Desperately, I wiped at my face, trying to hide the signs of my crying.

“Who’s hurt the worst?” Doc asked as he reached us.

“She is,” Tanner told him.

I lifted a hand to point at the room. “Austin and Derek.”

“Fuck ‘em,” Doc grumbled as he turned his attention on me. “Cody, can you follow my finger with your eyes?”

I got a quick checkup right there while sitting in the middle of the hallway. Doc pressed at the sore spot on my head. He turned my face from one side to the other, scanning my injuries. I had to prove to him I could move my arms and legs, but when he saw my hands trembling, he didn’t call me out for it.

Tanner had moved back and now had his phone in his hands. I could hear the sounds of texts being sent, and had a feeling he was telling J.D. what had happened. I just couldn’t decide if I hated that or wanted to thank him for it.

Then the slap of hard soled shoes proved yet another person was running our way. “Cody!”

Max! I recognized his voice and turned to see my rep doing the closest thing to a run he probably could. The man didn’t even pause to ask the doctor if I was ok. He just dropped down beside me and grabbed both of my hands.

“What happened? Are you ok? Do we need to get her an ambulance?”

“No,” I said to that last question. “I’m fine.”

“She’s probably been hit harder by a bull,” Doc assured Max. “I see no signs of a concussion. Looks like she’s going to have a few bruises show up later, but no broken bones. Cody, if you get any dark bruises on your abdomen, you call me right away, ok?”

I nodded. “Promise.”

Then he scowled at me, his brow furrowed like he was thinking hard. “I can give you a prescription for some pain pills, since you will start hurting soon, but I don’t want you on them for too long.”

“J.D.’s coming,” Tanner broke in. “I told him to bring his vape.”

“We need to get her back to the hotel,” Max insisted.

“What about my pictures?” I asked.

Max gave me a confused look. “Cody...”

“I’ve been waiting for those,” I said. “Who knows how long it will be before they’ll let me do this again. I need to take those pictures before the bruises get bad, Max.”

“Cody,” he tried again. “Sweetie, you’re hurt. You need to take care of yourself first. I mean, we can get you a flight home so you can see your dad. He’ll want to take care of you, and this is going to need a little time to heal before you try to ride again. Give yourself a chance to recover. Think about how you’re feeling, you know?”

“But I told my dad I was going to be a real bull rider,” I mumbled, aware I sounded childish, but I could feel my heart sinking. “They took everything else from me this weekend, Max. I’m not going to let them chase me off before I even get my official pictures. I wanted proof that I’m doing this. That I made it this far.”

Because if I couldn’t even walk the halls alone, what else did I have to hold on to? Showing my father my official PBR pictures was the one thing that would make him even more proud of me, and for some reason, it was what my mind decided to latch on to.

Maybe I hadn’t gotten any more sponsors. I couldn’t compete with the men because the judges weren’t going to score me fairly. I could push through all of that, making sure I rode the bulls each weekend, but eventually I’d get bucked off. Everyone did.

Which meant there was no way I could win. The odds were stacked against me, and everyone just wanted me to go home. So maybe I should? But then I’d lose J.D. and Tanner, and I didn’t want that. Not that I was doing this for a man, but they were that little push that kept tilting the scales back to trying one more time.

With my body aching and every inch of me hurting enough that the tears kept pushing at my eyes, giving in sounded so tempting. What sucked was that I had nothing else. If I quit riding bulls, then what else would I do with myself? I didn't have enough money to buy a farm. I knew a little about making hay, but not enough to do it on my own. I had the skills to be a cashier at a gas station, but not to get a job that would pay more than minimum wage!

This was what I'd dedicated my life to, and if I quit now, I'd have nothing. My best bet would be to settle down with some man, let him chase a career while I popped out babies for him. All my dreams would evaporate into the pathetic stories people told around the Elbow back home, and I'd end up spending the rest of my life counting down the days until I was old or dead - just like my dad.

Then there was my pride.

I wanted *more*. Even if I failed at it, if they were going to kick me out, then I wanted them to actually kick, not make me run away with my tail between my legs. I didn't want to grow old knowing I'd given up on the one dream I'd had. I didn't want to leave the PBR after only three fucking events!

"Let her take the pictures," Tanner said.

Max just looked me over, reaching up to wipe at my cheek with a fatherly hand. "Are you sure, Cody? I will not let them push you to do more than you think you can."

"I'm doing this," I decided.

Which earned me a weak little smile. "Ok. I have some wet wipes out in my car. Let me go get those. Tanner, can you help her into one of the rooms so she can clean herself up a bit and get ready?"

"I can," Tanner promised.

Doc just lifted a hand, holding Tanner off. "Cody, you listen to J.D. about how much of his weed you take, ok? Do not drive while stoned. Don't you even think about riding a bull when you're high. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," I assured him.

He nodded. “Ok. And now is as good of a time as any to tell you that your tests were negative. You’re good there, but I’m sure you won’t be feeling like doing anything about it for a few days at least.”

“Wouldn’t bet on that,” Tanner muttered from my other side.

Doc actually chuckled at that. “Kids. Trust me, when you hit forty, you do not recover from this shit as quickly.” Then he looked at me again. “Are you sure you can handle standing for these pictures? Posing? As your adrenaline wears off, you will start hurting.”

“Which is one thing I know how to deal with, Doc,” I promised.

“You bull riders really are a breed apart,” he grumbled as he pushed himself to his feet. “And I mean it about calling me. I can get a prescription called in no matter where we are. If you start hurting, do not try to tough it out. If you have a bruise that’s getting darker instead of fading, I don’t care what time it is. If you can’t reach me, head to the closest ER. Internal bleeding is nothing to mess with, and if I had my way, you’d be getting a full exam instead of photos.”

“Yeah but - “

“I get it,” he assured me. “I also know that changing your mind isn’t going to happen. Trust me, you are not my most stubborn patient.”

“Gonna bet that’s J.D.,” Tanner joked.

“Not even close,” Doc said, pausing to pat Tanner’s shoulder. “Make sure she’s not lightheaded when she gets up and you...” He gave Tanner a serious look. “Ice your hands, at the very least. You know the drill.”

“Will do,” Tanner said.

And while Doc headed to the room where Austin and Derek still remained silent, Tanner scrambled to his feet. This time, he didn’t try to pick me up. Instead, he thrust out his hand, offering it to me so I could pull myself up.

But it was the look on his face that got me. There was worry in his eyes, but also respect. He wasn't trying to baby me. He wasn't telling me I was making the wrong call. Tanner was just helping in the only way he knew how, and I had a funny feeling it was the exact same way he'd treat J.D.

So I clasped his hand and groaned as I pulled myself up. He tugged, giving me a little more assistance, then caught my waist when I made it. For just a moment, I allowed myself to lean against him, because I knew I couldn't do this alone. My head was ringing. My body felt like it was protesting everything.

And in the back of my mind, I kept hearing Austin's voice. *If you want to make it out of this in one piece, you'll pack your shit and go home.*

This wouldn't end. It wouldn't stop. Guys like Austin never gave up and they didn't know how to back down. This? It wouldn't be the last time someone hated me, so when was it too much? When did I call it quits?

Was riding bulls really worth it? If I couldn't win, and I couldn't change anything, then why was I still fighting so hard? Because it was all I had? Did that even matter if the deck was stacked against me?

I didn't want to quit, but as Tanner guided me down the hall, tucked in at his side, I couldn't help but wonder if I could do anything to stop it. It felt like the ones who hated me would just keep spurring this shit on until my dreams had been completely shattered.

CHAPTER 56



I WAS SHAVING the edges of my beard when my phone started going off. Grumbling at the interruption, I ignored the first notification, but the fifth in a row had me crossing the room to see what the hell was going on. When I saw Tanner's name on the screen, I was unlocking that bitch as fast as possible to see what was up.

Tanner:

Austin and Derek jumped Cody.

Tanner:

She got her ass kicked pretty bad, but I took them out.

Tanner:

She still wants to take pictures.

Tanner:

Fuck, she's a mess, man. You need to get here. I don't know what to tell her.

Tanner:

Doc says she's ok!

Tanner:

Oh, and bring your vape. She's gonna start hurting soon.

Wait, what? Cody was hurt? Fuck! The moment I saw that, I started moving. A swipe cleaned off my face. I found a t-shirt and pulled that on. My boots took longer. Fuck a belt. And while I was scrambling to put some real clothes on, my mind was in hyper-drive, trying to figure out how the hell I was getting over there.

I'd given Tanner my truck. Now I was stuck at this hotel without a ride. Most of the guys would be heading out sometime today, but the question was who tended to sleep in late? On impulse, I hit up one of my most consistent assistants: Jaxon.

J.D.:

Hey, tell me you're still in Cheyenne?

Thankfully, he replied almost immediately.

Jaxon:

For about another hour, why?

J.D.:

I need a ride to the arena. Someone jumped my rookie.

J.D.:

There's a bottle of THC liquid in it if you can meet me in the lobby in 5.

Jaxon:

See you there. Just need my boots and keys.

Thank fuck! Pushing out a heavy breath, I ran across the room for my bag, pulling out one of the spare bottles of the liquid I used in my vape pen. This stuff was easy to get in the legal states, but places like Wyoming weren't quite so accepting. If I knew Jaxon, and I did, he'd spent a little too much time high, and had probably blown through his entire stock.

Then, shoving my hat onto my head, I grabbed my phone and vape pen, then headed for the door. I had my hand on the handle when another text came in. Worried Jaxon was backing out, I checked it, only to see another message from Tanner.

Tanner:

Grab Cody's makeup. She says she's getting pictures.

A laugh actually slipped out at that. Of all the things for her to worry about, of course my girl would want to have an official picture. For the rest of us, if we didn't get it done, they'd use last year's, but Cody didn't have a last year's to use. For her, this was validation, and with the way she'd been fucked over, I could actually understand how much this meant right now.

So I hurried back to the sink and found that cute little bag girls used to carry their pretty shit. A few tubes were still on the counter, so I put those in, zipped the top, then called it good. Stretching my legs as much as I could, I stormed through the hall, needing to get to the lobby as fast as possible, knowing my girl - and guy - were waiting on me.

Thankfully, Jaxon was a little faster than me. When the elevator reached the ground floor, I stepped out to see the man pacing by the front doors. He checked his phone as I crossed the room, then began pacing again.

"Jaxon!" I snapped. The moment his head turned my way, I tossed the bottle of vape liquid at him. "Let's go."

"What the hell's going on, J.D.?" he asked as he left the building only a pace before me. "Is Cody ok?"

"Cody's always ok," I assured him, even though I had no idea if that was true.

It was what I'd want her to say about me, so I was saying it about her. I figured that was how things worked with us. She was a badass, and no one else needed to know if she maybe had moments where she just wanted to stop hurting. To

everyone else, she'd be the toughest of the tough in the whole wide world.

"But you said someone jumped your rookie," he pressed.

"Yep," I agreed, aiming for the big blue Dodge I knew was his. "Austin and his crew think they can chase her off. Well, they just forgot her boyfriend might be even meaner than me."

"So why are you going to the arena if she's ok?"

I reached the passenger door just as he got it all unlocked. Before I answered, I climbed in, then focused on my seatbelt. Jaxon hurried to get his key in the ignition, clearly a little frazzled by my need to get moving. The kid was a good one, but a little too easy to spook, if I was honest.

"Because no one fucks with my rookie," I told him. "I want to make sure Tanner put enough hurt on those assholes, and Cody needs to be pretty. She's getting her photos done."

"Oh." He twisted to back out of the parking space, then pulled out like this thing was supposed to be a hot rod. Fucking gas trucks.

"And you can make sure the rest of the guys know Austin and Derek are dead to me," I said. "They crossed a line today, Jaxon."

"Hitting a girl?" he asked. "Although Cody's tough. I have a feeling she hit back just as hard."

"And they touched something of mine," I growled. "No one touches what's mine."

"Thought she was Tanner's."

I murmured at that. "Tanner's mine too. The guy's a friend. Cody's my best friend. No one fucks with my friends. They're *mine*."

"Gotcha," Jaxon promised. "I'll keep my ears open to see if anyone else is talking shit about her, ok? I mean, you know Casey and Eli have been trying to scare her off too, right?"

"Yep."

“And I know a few others joke about her,” he went on, “but I don’t think they’re serious. I’ll still let you know if I hear shit.”

I nodded my head slowly. “I appreciate it. Next time I talk to Ariat, I’ll make sure they know they haven’t signed with you yet.”

“Really?” he glanced over. “Fuck, thanks man.”

“Call it payback for the quick ride,” I assured him.

When we reached the arena, Jaxon pulled up right by the door to sports medicine. “Need me to stick around?”

“Nope, my truck’s here,” I said. “Enjoy the drive to Iowa, man. And thanks again.”

“Any time, J.D.,” he told me. “I’ll be here another hour, so text if you need anything.”

I climbed out, then patted the side of his truck. “You’re one of the good ones, Jaxon. Don’t change.”

“Not plannin’ on it,” he said, flashing me a proud smile.

Walking into the arena complex wasn’t easy. Once I was out of sight, I gave up on that shit and ran. Cody’s little makeup bag clanked in my hand, all those girly tubes bouncing around in my grip, but the truth was that I was freaking out inside.

Someone had jumped her? How bad was she hurt? Was Doc taking care of her? What if she couldn’t ride next weekend?

I slid into the hall, grabbing the corner to make the turn, then reached the twin doors for sports medicine. Pulling those open, I rushed inside in time to see Anthony standing in the middle of the room, talking to an older man in a very starched shirt.

“J.D.?” Anthony asked.

“Where’s Cody?”

He pointed, the direction of his arm meaning jack and shit to me right now. “She’s in the press room. Well, over there.

Tanner's with her. They have the photo shit set up over there."

"Thanks," I managed before turning and running again.

I knew where the press room was. I'd been hauled in there a few times over the years. It was where the bean counters put us up for grilling by the sports channels. They slapped up all their fancy shit on the walls, let the press ask stupid-ass questions that proved they knew nothing about our sport, and shit like that.

But when I got closer, I heard the sound of Cody's voice coming from one of the rooms at the side. It was hard to miss, being the only woman in the building right now. Well, so far as I knew, she was. So I followed that, finding an outdated lounge where she had Tanner and Max crowded up around her.

"Cody?" I asked as I pushed between them to see her.

She looked up at me with the biggest, bluest eyes. "J.D." My name came out sounding like a prayer.

"Got your makeup," I said, offering that up like some kind of consolation prize. "How bad do you hurt, babe?"

That earned me a weak smile. "About nine hundred pounds worth."

"So steer not bull," I said, proving I understood her measuring method. Then I pulled the vape pen from my back pocket and held it out. "Not legal in this state, but hit that once."

"I got eye drops," Max said proudly, shoving a hand into his pocket to pull out a small bottle.

Cody took a long hit off my vape pen, then passed it back while still holding the breath in. Reclining in her chair, she let her eyes close for a moment, and then exhaled it all in a rather impressive cloud. Max waved the smoke away from his face before bending to press the eye drops into her relaxed hand.

"You'll want a few drops of those to hide any redness," he told her.

"And you need to put your eyes back on," I added. "Looks like you washed your face."

“I did.” She lifted her lids and already looked like she was feeling better. “I just don’t know what to do, J.D.”

“Get pretty, get pictures,” I told her. “That’s what you wanted, right?”

“But should I even try?” she asked.

“Do you wanna?” I shot back.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, but I’m tired of fucking it all up.”

“Fuck,” I grumbled. “Stop acting like a girl, Cody. You don’t gotta take all the blame for someone else’s shit. Maybe that dick you dated before told ya that, but it’s bullshit.”

“And none of this is your mess,” Tanner said, catching on quickly. “What did *you* do wrong?”

“Dumped Ty,” she mumbled as she opened the bag and started digging inside.

“Was it wrong?” Max asked. “Sounds to me like he was taking you for granted, and trust me, that is not the right way to treat someone you care about.”

“He was treating her like an object,” Tanner said.

Cody’s hands paused. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Face,” I reminded her. “If you’re too high to get pretty, then you ain’t gettin’ pictures today.”

“And my dad has been waiting for them,” she explained. “He likes showing me off to his friends. And he works with my ex, so he tries to do it loud enough that Cole hears.”

“Which is why we’re doing this today,” Max realized, turning to look at me. “I tried to convince her to go home and recover. I mean, missing next weekend won’t knock her down far enough to prevent her from making finals, and she’ll ride better when she’s healed up.”

“And it’s Tanner’s home show,” I pointed out. “Naw, Max. We’ll take care of her. If she scratches, then she does. Can’t see it happening, though. Not that one.”

“Don’t make her feel like she has to,” Tanner told me.

Cody just giggled, proof the pot had hit her a little harder than it did me. “I can still hear you.”

“And still don’t have mascara,” I teased. “C’mon, rookie. This is the real deal. You want to take these pictures, then you need to get your ass in gear. Shit’s not gonna wait forever, and until you say you’re done, I’m gonna keep calling you my rookie, you hear me?”

She began setting things out on the little end table beside her. “I hear you, J.D.”

“You gonna lie to me about how you’re doing?”

“Nope.”

So I gestured for the other two guys to step back, then crouched down before her. “And you’re ok? For real, Cody, are you actually ok?”

Those pretty blue eyes shifted over to meet mine. “I’m freaking out a little, J.D.”

“And that’s ok,” I promised her. “Kinda normal. What about the rest? You hurting?”

“I’ll be ok,” she assured me.

“Just this one,” I told her. “Right here, right now, Cody. One step at a time, and no matter what, I’m not gonna leave ya to do it alone. Not if you don’t leave me neither.”

“I just want to make it through the pictures,” she admitted. “Right now, that’s all I can handle.”

So I nodded. “Then that’s what we’ll do. And if it gets to be too much, you speak up. This is all your call, Cody. Tanner and I are just here to back you up. Kinda what good men do.”

She smiled, opening a bottle of something flesh-colored. “Yeah. It really is.” Then she began painting her face. “And so you know, you two are very good men.”

CHAPTER 57



I WAS a little more drastic with my makeup the second time around. Mostly, that was to hide the mess Austin and Derek had made of my face. As I worked on foundation and concealer, I could feel the sore spots, but they weren't visible...yet.

I also had to hide the marks on my neck. Where I'd been punched was red. When I swallowed, I could feel the swelling already starting. Thankfully, a little extra eyeliner, eye shadow, and mascara helped me feel like I had this. It gave me the tough feel, and the woman staring back at me from my compact mirror looked pretty badass.

The one hit off J.D.'s vape pen pushed the pain back, but it wasn't enough to make it completely vanish. When I stood, I could feel my body screaming in protest, but I ignored it. How many times had I pushed through worse? I would *not* let some idiots take me out when no bull had managed to do it yet.

Someone had gathered up my things from that hall. J.D. held out my chaps. Tanner was hugging my vest and holding my hat. Surprisingly, my phone wasn't broken. Bit by bit, I strapped myself into my gear just like I did for an event. When Max moved closer to wipe a little dust from my arm, I knew I had this. It was just like riding bulls. I needed to get my mind in the zone.

Just right here.

Just right now.

Then Max led all three of us to the press room where the photographer had set up. The first thing I noticed was the massive green screen. The second was the lighting setup. This looked like the sort of things used on models, and for some reason that made me even more anxious.

“Ok,” Max said to the photographer. “This is Cody Jennings. We’re going to need at least four poses for promotions, as well as her official image for the website.”

“Sure,” the man said as he turned to greet me. Then his eyes widened and his smile faltered. “*You’re Cody?*”

“I am,” I assured him.

The man just rocked his head in a slow nod and looked back at Max. “Bull riding?”

“The first woman in the PBR,” Max said, lifting his face defiantly.

Today, cherubic was not the way I’d describe him. Max might inherently look like a sweet man, but there was something a little harder in his eyes right now. A determination that let me relax, because he had this for me.

So, settling my hat onto my head to hide the blood I hadn’t completely gotten off my scalp, I moved to where the photographer pointed. A green tarp was on the ground. The same color green was behind me, arced around in a semicircle so nothing else would show.

Once I was in place, the photographer flipped a switch and lights turned on. Lots of them. I couldn’t help but wonder if my injuries would shine through my makeup with this much wattage, but none of the guys said anything.

Instead, J.D. and Tanner moved to lean against the side wall. That put them out of the way, but also where I could see them. Max was hovering beside the camera setup. The photographer angled the lighting rigs down - always down - until he approved of the results. Then he started giving orders.

“Ok, Cody, turn to the side. Lift your chin.” He messed with his camera. “Eyes on the far wall. Smile!”

The flash went off, but this did not feel like the same kind of poses the guys got. The man's next words proved it.

"Can you unzip the vest?"

"No." I didn't even bother to look at him.

This was not at all what I'd signed up for! I wanted these pictures so I could prove that I was here. So I could leave my mark on the sport. So my father had *proof* that I was the real deal, and this man was already trying to make me look more like a buckle bunny than a rider?

"Ok..." The man did not sound impressed. "Well, let me get you to tilt your head a bit. Now look back at the camera. I need coy. Give me a little flirtation, Cody. Show the public why they pay so much for tickets."

I clenched my jaw instead, glaring at the man. The harder he tried to talk me into being seductive, the more I resisted. It didn't take long before Max was also telling him no. Blowing a kiss at the camera? No. Hands up and in my hair? No. Popping my hip and arching my back? No.

I was mentally holding on to the idea of these photos with all I had. This was supposed to be what kept me going. A reason for not quitting. Instead, this man was making me more ashamed of myself than even Austin and Derek had a moment ago.

I'd come to the PBR to make a name for myself. I was a bull rider to build a new future. I was not here to be sexy, and I hadn't asked anyone to give a shit what I *looked* like. So what if I was a woman? Who cared that I had breasts? The damned vest hid all of that!

But these men couldn't ignore it. They couldn't just let me work my way up with the same rules they'd been given. They wanted to knock me down, too scared that a woman keeping up would somehow make them lesser. I had no idea how the hell they thought that would work, but I had no interest in making it easy for them.

"I'm a damned bull rider!" I finally snapped. "I'm not here to look seductive. I'm not a damned supermodel. I'm a bull

rider, and I expect these pictures to put me in the same poses as the men.”

“Oh, that’s what you want?” the photographer snapped, clearly as annoyed with this entire ordeal as I now was. “Fine. Face the big light to your left. Show me what you think tough looks like.”

Beside the photographer, Max had his phone out, typing away furiously. He was supposed to have my back! Why wasn’t he saying anything right now? I felt alone. Not even J.D. or Tanner seemed to see the problem, but I did. Hell, I couldn’t get away from it.

This might be the last chance I had to make the world see me the way I wanted. Every inch of my body hurt, one more price I’d been willing to pay to reach my dreams, and no one seemed to give a damn. The fact that I was a woman blinded everyone else to my potential, but I’d spent my entire fucking life for this day.

This one. Right here. The moment I could show the world that I’d actually done it.

And instead, I was being pulled down and stepped on all over again. Smile pretty, act like a lady, pack your things and go home. That was all I’d gotten, and I was sick of it! I rode the bulls. I’d spurred them on this weekend, riding better than I ever had in my entire life, and not even that had been enough.

They wanted me gone. The real question was how far the people around me would go to make that happen. If J.D. and Tanner couldn’t even see it, then how the fuck was I supposed to fight back? I couldn’t do this alone. I couldn’t make anyone like me.

All I could do was let them see my rage.

Hooking my thumbs in the waistband of my chaps, I lifted my chin. The flash went off. I let my anger show. I embraced the defiance that was keeping me standing through the pain of that beat down I’d taken. Next, I was turned to the other side. This time, I crossed my arms, fighting hard not to snarl. Again,

the flash proved the photo had been taken. Then he had me face him.

Hands on hips. Head tilted down like some kind of outlaw. They didn't want to see my face? Fine! In chaps and a vest, I looked like all the other men. I'd show them that. Flash, flash.

"You are a pretty girl," the camera man said. "You could make these worth something, and instead you want to look masculine? Want to waste the chance?"

So I crossed my arms over my chest and lifted my chin. "Chance for what? To have some idiot jacking off to my photo online? To have the men in this sport laugh at me a little more? Fuck that!"

The flash hit me again, and this time Max smiled. "That's the one," he said. "That, Cody, is your official photo. I'll make sure of it."

The photographer just threw up his hands in defeat. "Fine. We're done here. I have enough raw stock to make something the PBR can use."

Giving the asshole a dirty look, I marched off the green tarp, heading over towards my guys. I didn't make it before Max was calling my name, angling his steps to intercept. That was when I realized we weren't alone in the room anymore. The bright lights and umbrella looking screens had obscured everything behind the camera from me.

"Cody," Max said, gesturing for me to come with him. "I know it's not a good time, but I have two people who want to talk to you."

"Not a good time?" a woman asked.

A few more steps got the glare of lights out of my eyes, and I realized I recognized her. "Grace?" I asked.

And beside her was a man I remembered from the meeting last week. He'd been the guy all but lying in his chair, swiveling it around like he was bored. The man who'd asked me about Mike's Hard Lemonade.

“Cody,” he greeted me, offering his hand. “Troy Randolph, Mike’s Hard drinks.”

“And it sounds like you already know Grace Fuller from Under Armour,” Max said. “Would you two mind if we find a place for her to sit down? Our little heroine has had a rough day.”

“Cody?” Tanner asked, sounding like he was worried.

But J.D. caught his arm. “Those are sponsors,” he said, flashing me a smile.

Grace’s head twitched slightly. “J.D. Adkins?”

“Yes, ma’am,” J.D. replied. “That woman you wanna talk to? She’s my rookie, and about to be the best damned bull rider the PBR’s ever seen.”

“Interesting,” Troy said, gesturing for the door. “There’s a room right across the hall. Cody, you’re welcome to invite anyone you want. I don’t think this is actually official.”

So I looked back at the guys, and that was all they needed. In a few seconds, we were sitting in yet another one of those outdated rooms, but this one had a table. It also had black-and-white photos of race horses. Not a single thing about bull riders or rodeo, though.

Grace started without mincing her words. “Under Armour is sending a contract for you to look over,” she said. “Max has informed me that he’s your representative.”

“I am,” he insisted.

“And you work for Tillman,” she reminded him.

Max huffed like he wasn’t impressed. “I do. I also represent my riders and I’m here to make sure they get what’s in their best interest.”

“They?” Troy asked.

“He reps me too,” J.D. said as he reached over to gently rub my shoulder. “Still doing ok?”

“What happened?” Troy asked.

It was Tanner who answered, and his voice was much too calm, almost like ice. “Two men decided to jump her in the halls. Two! They want to chase her out of the sport, so if you think you can do the same - “

Max groaned, but Troy shot to his feet. “What?” the man demanded.

“That’s what they do to women who don’t listen,” Grace told him.

“Cody, are you ok?” Troy asked.

“I’ve been hit worse by a bull,” I assured him. “Got some bruises, but I’ll be fine by Des Moines.”

Troy just pressed his hands down on the table and leaned over them. “Wow. When they said bull riders are tough, I had no idea.” Then he looked up. “And Mike’s wants a place on your vest.”

“Why?” I shot back, all the frustration and pain more than I could hold back right now. The hit from J.D.’s vape probably didn’t help much either. “Don’t you two get it? My scores were shit this weekend. The judges screwed me. I rode those bulls better than most of the men here, and they fucked me over hoping I’d take the hint!”

“Did you?” Grace asked. “Are you giving up?”

“No!”

J.D. just chuckled softly, leaning back in his chair.

“She rode harder,” Tanner told them. “She pushed those mediocre bulls until pictures of her on them will become collector’s items. She stuck to the back of all three, even when half the men on this tour couldn’t say the same.”

“But if you want your name to be seen by the media, it doesn’t look like I’m the one for you,” I grumbled.

“Cody,” Max said. “Don’t sabotage your own career.”

“No,” Troy said, waving him down. “I know where she’s coming from. I just have one question. Cody, do you think

you're the only woman who will ever want to compete in this sport?"

"Of course not," I assured him. "Dozens of us try. It's just not easy, and it takes a lot of work to get the upper-body strength to ride at this level."

"But you did it," he pressed. "So someone else might as well, right?"

"Definitely," I said.

He nodded. "So what happens to the girl who comes next?"

I felt my skin tingle as the reality of his words hit me. My heart thumped hard once, which set my ears to ringing. Maybe that was the drugs? No, it was the idea of another woman - one not as mean as me - going through what I'd just survived.

Because Austin hadn't wanted me to go home. He'd wanted to make sure I was hurt bad enough that I'd never ride again. He'd gotten hard from beating me! Alone, in the halls where no one else was likely to come though? What if he'd knocked me out? What if he did the same with the next girl? What if it didn't end there?

"If you give up," Grace pressed, "how much harder will she have it? See, Under Armour wants to sponsor you because you're blazing a trail. You are breaking new ground. That's what our brand is all about, which is why we're interested in you. Not just because of your scores, although seventh place means our logo would still be seen."

"And Mike's wants to be on this side of history," Troy admitted. "To have our logo on the first woman to ride in the PBR."

I stared at him for a little too long. Maybe it was the pain. Possibly, it was the drugs. Either way, his words made me think of the women I'd met since Tulsa.

I couldn't forget the way Shelby had screamed in enthusiasm when I'd shown her my check. The excitement she'd had to make signs and cheer me on. How she'd asked if I'd help teach her son to ride when he decided to try it.

Then there'd been the cashier in that western wear store. The one who'd bent over backwards and had been so thrilled that a woman was doing this. That I was making history.

Every time my name was called by the announcer, I'd heard the women's voices. I'd met a few of the fans. The video I'd made for a lady named Sabrina, helping her understand this sport so she could enjoy it more without worrying about the animals.

One after the other, the memories of women standing just a little taller because I was doing this all slammed into me. No, I hadn't come here to make history. I wasn't looking for fame or recognition because I was the first. *My* goal was to make enough money to have a few more options in my life, but that didn't change that I was doing this.

"They aren't going to make this easy on me," I warned the two sponsors before me.

"I think you can handle it," Max assured me.

"We want to sponsor you," Troy said, "because we want our brand associated with those who stand up for the *right* things."

"Because someone has to do it first," Grace said, and I wasn't sure she was speaking for her company. "Cody, you're getting noticed, and the more that happens, the more 'they' will come after you. It's how it's always worked for women. If you want something, you have to fight - and keep fighting - until they simply can't take it away from you."

I glanced at the guys, aware both were watching me silently. "I didn't come here to make a scene about being a woman," I told them.

"Maybe not," J.D. said, "don't mean it won't happen."

"And you can do this," Tanner assured me. "Shit, Cody. They haven't stopped you yet, and the two of us have your back." J.D. just nodded, showing he agreed.

Then I scanned the faces around me again. Five sets of eyes hung on me, waiting for my decision. The strange thing was I honestly felt like they all believed in me. Those photos

had made me feel like I was supposed to be a toy, but these people? The ones willing to help me do this? They were looking at me with the one thing I needed right now.

Respect.

It lit a fire in my belly. It pushed away all the doubts that had been trying to pull me down. The looks on their faces were enough to remind me how much I'd already fought to get here, and I knew it would be a shame to give up now.

Then there was the memory of my father's voice as he told me to hold on to my dreams, no matter what. He'd made me promise him that I wouldn't let anything change my mind but *me*. Not assholes like Austin. Not my scores. Just me.

I could do this. More than that, I *should* do this! What was I even thinking, letting a couple of shitty bull riders make me doubt myself? Disco Breakout had hit me harder than they could ever hope to. I had this. I could do this.

So I laid my hands on the table and took a deep breath. "Just so all of you know, I didn't come here to change anything. I showed up because I wanted a check, and I know I ride good enough to win. I *know* I can do this, but if they need me to break a glass ceiling before that can happen..."

I smiled down at my hands, finding my resolve.

"Then I will fucking *shatter* it. I'm not the kind of girl who breaks. I'm the one who breaks things to get what I want."

"Yeah..." J.D. breathed. "And that, Cody, is why you're my rookie."

Troy just pushed to his feet. "Max, you'll have our contract in the morning. I don't care how much she wants, Mike's will pay it."

"Under Armour wants to be plastered all over her," Grace said. "Because that? It's the kind of press we've been looking for."

Then Tanner reached over to grab my hand. "You got this, Cody. Let's show those guys that their bigoted views can't stop anything."

I stood, aware that I needed to leave, but Max caught my hand. “Cody? This is how we make it easier for the next ones, right?” And his eyes flicked over to J.D. and Tanner.

I nodded. “Yeah. I think I’d rather be the protector than the target.”

“You will always be a target,” he countered. “I’m sorry, Cody, but you will. The question is if you really think you can handle everything they’ll throw at you.”

But that resolve was back, and stronger than ever, so I smiled down at him. “Watch me, Max. If they need me to prove I’m tough enough?” I lifted my hand, where the scrapes from punching those guys earlier were still visible. “Then I’ll be the one spurring things on. I’m used to getting hurt. Everyone draws a bad bull. We all hit the dirt. The thing is, I’ve already shown that I can do the one thing I need to.”

“What’s that?” Max asked, worry in his eyes.

“When I get knocked down, I always get back up. Always, and I’m not about to stop now.”

EPILOGUE



I MADE one last scan of the room, then closed my bag and lifted it onto my shoulder. Jake had left a couple of hours ago, telling me to take my time before checking out. My hangover had me moving slowly, but I was definitely moving. I wanted to get the fuck out of Cheyenne, because all the memories of Cody made me feel like I was drowning.

Snagging the keycard for this room, I let out a heavy sigh and headed for the door. Just before I grabbed the handle, I heard the sound of a woman's voice on the other side. One I knew much too well. Then the deep rumble of a man's: J.D. When Tanner's voice joined them, I decided to peek out the peephole, letting them pass before I had to deal with something awkward.

So I was being a pussy. I was fine with that.

It didn't take long. Jake's room was only a few down from the elevator. Cody was at the opposite end of this hall, and it wasn't a short one. The moment I felt it was safe, I stepped out, intending to turn and march my ass straight to the elevator.

Instead, I looked back.

Tanner's arm was around her waist. J.D. had his wrapped around her shoulders. The men had her pinned between them like they were almost holding her up, and Cody wasn't fighting it at all. Her chaps were draped across Tanner's shoulders. J.D. had her vest hanging from his outside arm. She had on her show shirt, hat, and spurs, but why?

They looked so good like that. Those two men just worked with her. I could see the white of her teeth as she smiled at her boyfriend. J.D. just beamed at the pair of them, acting like they were the only ones in the entire world.

And here I was, the poor fool standing alone, wishing I was one of them. She didn't need a damned protector. What the fuck had I been thinking? Sadly, I knew the answer to that question.

I'd been worried about me. I'd been so stuck on someone thinking the wrong thing that I'd forgotten Cody had dreams of her own. That woman was going places, and I'd actually had the chance to be at her side, but I'd thought I should be leading.

I was a damned fool.

When they reached the last door on the hall, J.D. fumbled with the lock while Cody laughed at him. The sound hit me hard. That was perfection. It was the thing I would never be able to get out of my mind. Because I'd been so worried about getting laid, I'd lost it - her. I'd given up the best thing I'd ever known in my life, and for what? Because I thought I was a man, and that meant she should act like a woman? Fuck that.

So, settling my hat onto my head, I turned the other way, aiming for the elevator. I barely made it a step before I realized I wasn't the only one watching them. Across the hall and two doors down, there was Eli Tripwood. He'd changed out of his signature red and yellow colors, the blue denim and grey t-shirt making him look a lot less impressive.

"The fuck they doing?" he asked me.

I glanced back just as the trio vanished into their room. "Not my business," I assured him. "Or yours."

"Yeah, fuck that," Eli grumbled. Then his eyes narrowed. "Or didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?" I asked.

Eli took a step closer, which made me move to meet him. "That little bitch almost got Austin suspended!" he hissed. "She picked a fight with him and Derek, and now they've both

been fined enough that it's gonna hurt. Full PBR report, the whole deal."

Cody? Pick a fight? Yeah, not fucking likely. "Or maybe they started it and she finished it?" I asked.

Eli scoffed. "C'mon, Ty. I figured that after she shot you down last night, you'd be a little less blind to the shit she's pulling."

"And what shit is that?" I asked.

He flicked a finger in the direction Cody and the guys had gone. "You think that shit's normal?"

"That she's with her boyfriend and mentor?"

"Yeah." He lifted a brow. "One bitch and two men? How the fuck is *that* supposed to work? You can't tell me they aren't getting kinky in there, and I heard J.D. Adkins likes to suck dick."

"Thought Austin was trying to say Tanner was the gay one," I reminded him. "I mean, right up until Cody started dating him. Sounds to me more like someone got shot down."

"You did," Eli huffed. "Austin doesn't want to be with her. He wants her gone, and know what? I agree. Ever since she got here, shit hasn't been the same."

"How so?" I asked, daring him to give me a real reason.

"Bulls have been off. Sponsors aren't begging. Scores are all over. She's fucked up the PBR because the uppity-ups are all trying so hard to prove how fucking woke they are. Hey, it's diversity, right? Add in a woman, a few gay guys, maybe some minorities and shit? Before you know it, there will be nothing country about any of this. Nothing but heavy metal music, libtards hugging trees, and shit like that."

I scoffed. "Man, I don't give a shit about your American politics. Doesn't help my Canadian ass at all."

"Will when you're not getting paid because the money's only going to the minorities," Eli countered.

“Yeah, that is not how it works,” I assured him. “Trust me, we’ve done this north of the forty-ninth.”

“The what?” Eli asked.

I closed my eyes and groaned. “The forty-ninth parallel. You know, the border between the US and Canada?” I huffed in frustration. “Maybe start worrying about your own shit before you wake up and realize you’re no longer qualified.”

I turned to walk away, but that was a little more than Eli could take. “Don’t think that’s going to be a problem, Ty. Soon as those three are out, nothing’s going to stand in my way.”

“Like shit,” I shot back. “Besides, good luck getting rid of any of them. She rides good, even if you don’t like it.”

“And I’m not about to have some queer running around behind the chutes with us!” His voice was getting loud enough that I was sure people could hear it in their rooms. “Those two are disgusting, and if you think we’re just going to turn a blind eye to that shit, then maybe you’re not the man I thought you were.”

“I’m not,” I promised. “I don’t give a damn if the pair of them are tag-teaming Cody. Nothing wrong with a little kink, and if you don’t think everyone else is having fun with the women we meet at those bars? Shit.” I laughed, making it clear that was directed right at him. “What, Eli, are you still doing it missionary, or haven’t you met a buckle bunny desperate enough to go home with you yet?”

“You’re the one that’s been sleeping alone,” he shot back. “Or maybe you wish you were in there, waving your dick around with two others in the room? Fucking disgusting.”

“Scared another man might show you up? Both inches aren’t enough to be impressive?” I taunted. “Jesus, Eli. Who cares what’s going on with them?”

“I do!”

“And I don’t want some idiot like you making decisions on who the rest of us fuck,” I snapped. “I’m so damned sick of this shit. Just leave Cody alone, ok?”

“She’s the one who fucked up,” Eli growled. “She could’ve packed her shit and gone home like a good girl. She should’ve taken a hint. Now? Well, she seems to think she’s all that, and J.D.’s head is so far up her ass that he has no clue what’s going on anymore.”

“And what *is* going on?” I asked.

Which made Eli’s face change into a cruel smile. “J.D. is sucking dick. Tanner’s taking it up the ass. Cody’s a little whore, selling herself out to the highest bidder. Once all that shit comes out, how long do you think the PBR is going to welcome them on tour, hm? This sport has a reputation to uphold and all that shit. And you know what? Once they’re gone?” He laughed. “I’ll have a clear path right to finals. Ain’t like any of the rest of ya will hold me back.”

I hit him in the shoulder, forcing him back. “That’s not how it’s going to fucking work,” I snarled, “because you forgot one thing. Me. If you think I’m going to leave you to have easy street, then you’re the idiot. Go ahead, Eli, start shit, because I will be there to finish it.”

“She fucked you over, Ty,” he ranted. “She’s the reason J.D. put his fist in your face.”

“*I’m* the reason that happened,” I spat. “I also don’t care if you think screwing over the whole tour is going to put you on easy street. I’ll make damned sure it never happens. If I have to step up, Eli, then you watch me.”

“You don’t know how,” he taunted.

I just canted my head and stepped back. “Keep telling yourself that, dumbass. I made a bet with a girl, and I have every intention of winning it. If that means I need to knock you down a few pegs - and every other asshole in the PBR along with you - then I will. I’m not about to let you and your idiot friends fuck this up for me, you hear me?”

“Try it,” Eli dared me.

I laughed once. “That’s the thing. I am. Maybe having a woman in the PBR has you running scared, but she’s the reason I’m finally taking this shit seriously. And you watch me

ride, motherfucker. Just watch, because if you think she's got your balls sucking up, just wait to see what happens when I stop fucking around."

Then I turned and headed for the elevator, not giving that asshole the chance to say anything else. I heard him huff, but it seemed he hadn't seen my response coming. Yeah, well, too bad for him - a little fighting was exactly what I needed right now, and the kind of fighting that Cody might actually approve of.

Because maybe, just maybe, if I could get my shit together, then she might even give me a second chance. I just had to prove I was the kind of man who actually deserved it.

The *Shades of Trouble* series features a strong woman and the alpha men who love her. For the purposes of the story, some medical and professional ethics may be bent or even broken. Graphic language and situations that are suitable for a mature audience are included.

Potential Triggers: Mentions of cancer, violence, criminal history, eating disorders, bullying, self harm, and discussions of child sexual assault and trauma.

SHADES OF TROUBLE

COLLIDE: BOOK 1

Prologue



Black wasn't exactly our color. Shoulder to shoulder, my only real friends stood silently, watching the casket sink into the ground. They'd traveled from all over the world for this. Paris, Toronto, Denver, New York, Los Angeles, and more. Unlike the rest of the mourners, our little group dared to bring color. Crimson, Teal, Magenta, Cyan, Chartreuse, and more - they were all represented proudly. It was what Gran would have wanted, and we owed her nothing less.

It also made the country bumpkins around us feel uncomfortable. Arranged like a rainbow, our attire raised awkward questions these people would rather not ask, and rightly so. Gran had never hidden that she was a lesbian. She also hadn't flaunted it. That I was having her buried beside her former girlfriend had the small Texas town in a tizzy. That her "family" all wore neon accents and held brilliantly-dyed carnations would cause an even bigger fervor.

I knew how to make a statement, and I intended for this to be a big one. Through all the prayers, I just stared at the soft grey coffin. Through the pretty words and sniveling neighbors, I refused to weep. If I didn't need to be seen, I wouldn't be here. The last thing I intended was to show any grief around these people. I just wanted to remember my grandmother as she'd been in life, not cold and unmoving. I wanted to remember the charming old woman who'd refused to ever grow up, the woman who'd proudly shown dozens of kids a better life. The mentor who'd been willing to share everything with her granddaughter when no one else had. The woman who'd brought color into a dark world.

Then it was time. One by one, the others made their way closer to drop a flower or a word into the ground above the coffin. I couldn't move. This was it. *This* made it real. This was supposed to be closure, but it felt like a knife right through the middle of my heart as white roses and stiff lilies began to pile up. When there was no one else, a stout man wearing turquoise accents stepped forward and released his cyan flower, making sure the color wasn't hidden under the pile of white. It was fitting.

My eyes watched as others did the same and the rainbow piled up. The Shades of Trouble, Gran had called us. Each one had a story behind it. Dark, miserable stories that had only turned bright with Gran's help. While I watched, my eyes tried to blur, but I blinked the tears away. I owed that much to my grandmother at the very least. Strong women didn't cry.

"Violet," a deep voice whispered into my ear. "Say your goodbyes, sweetie."

Blinking, I managed to break my eyes free and turn them on him. He didn't belong here. Ashton's suit was tailored to his athletic frame. His hair was trendy. Even his nails were manicured. With the magenta vest, tie, and pocket square, he made one hell of a statement, and the hand on my back said I was the reason why. Letting out a sigh, I let my head collapse to his shoulder.

"I can't believe she's gone."

“I know.” He brushed an imaginary strand of hair away from my face. “We all loved her. That’s why we came, because she saved so many of us. She was like the mother most of us wish we had.”

“And now she’s gone.” I flicked my eyes toward the sky, hoping they wouldn’t give in now.

But Ashton just tapped my chest. “She’ll always be right there.” Then his own. “And here. It’s all we get, sweetie. A few decades on this earth, then it’s someone else’s turn. Right now, it’s yours. C’mon, let’s tell Gran goodbye, then I’ll take you back to the hotel.”

My teeth found my lower lip. “Gonna stay?”

“Yeah. All night if you need it. Won’t even complain about smudged mascara for at least two days.”

His teasing broke through my sadness enough that I smacked him lightly. “Waterproof, bud. I came prepared for a funeral.”

He dodged, but only to slide his hand to my lower back and guide me forward. All the rest had made their peace and moved to the side. We were the last. Even the pastor was packing up his things.

Ashton lifted his magenta flower. “Thanks for everything, Gran. You were always there when I needed you, and all you ever wanted was for me to pay it forward. I always wished you’d been my mother and I’m going to miss you. Wind to thy wings, ya old bat.”

My eyes were starting to sting, but I blinked them clear again while Ashton tossed in his flower. All that was left was me, then she’d be gone forever. Taking a deep breath, I clutched my tiny bouquet of violets.

“Thanks, Gran. For everything. I’m gonna miss you so much. I promise I’ll always be your little Violet. I’m not gonna let anyone tear me down, but I’ll keep doing the right thing, just like you always said. I’m gonna make our dreams come true. Bye, Gran. Maybe I’ll see you on the other side.” Then I tossed the flowers.

Four little violets tied with a lavender ribbon landed atop the pile of neon carnations. The image was seared in my mind. Like a scream of defiance, the array of colors was a silent declaration of allegiance. It meant so much more than anyone knew. This was our eternal pledge. Those bright flowers were a public acknowledgement of who Gran had really been, and it meant so much more than a simple gay pride display. It meant she'd turned colors into something that could bind together a flock of wayward kids and make us all into something better.

"I hope heaven has rainbows," I whispered. "You deserve nothing less."

"Yeah," Ashton agreed, steering me away. "C'mon, babe. Let's go home."

Home was another hotel in another city - for now. I had two months left on my latest tour, but I'd be back. When I was done, I'd return to the house where I'd grown up. It wouldn't be the same. Southwind had been empty for almost two years while Gran battled cancer. Right now, it was nothing more than an empty reminder of my childhood, but we'd made plans. Gran's will made it clear that the house was mine, and she'd asked me to make it a haven for those who'd lost their way.

She'd basically cut everyone else out of her life except me and those kids she'd turned into success stories. But when the cancer had gotten bad, Gran hadn't wanted to bother us. She'd been convinced that her pseudo-family wouldn't be able to take the pain. The reality was that Gran hadn't wanted us to see her lose. Cancer was the only thing that had ever been stronger than that woman.

Considering what we'd managed to overcome while she was alive, that was saying a lot. The two of us were the black sheep of the family, so we'd made our own. Back then, it had been me and Gran against the world. Then the rest had wormed their way in, proving that family wasn't born, it was made. Now, the plan was to make sure I paid it forward. That was all Gran had ever asked of us. For me, that meant following in my grandmother's footsteps.

“Thank you, guys,” I told my friends.

A Black man with a crimson-red tie stepped closer, resting his palm on my shoulder. “This is the only family most of us know, Violet. I had to come.”

The others nodded in agreement. A few eyes were damp.

“But,” Crimson continued, dropping his voice, “we still have each other. So long as we keep that, we’ll be fine. Call me if you need *anything*, hun.”

“Yeah,” the woman with chartreuse trim on her black dress agreed. “Anything, Vi.”

Nodding, I let Ashton turn me away, guiding me back to our car. Halfway there, across the grass, a man walked toward us. Like everyone else, he wore a suit. Unlike my friends, there was no color, but he had a black cowboy hat and well-polished boots instead. Basically, he looked like some outdated television oil tycoon. I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“Miss Dawson?” the man called, begging me to wait.

Under his breath, Ashton growled, but he still stopped. When I turned to face the man, my friend’s hand stayed possessively on my back, his body pressed into my side. It was kind of nice to have a little bit of muscle to back me up.

“Can I help you, Mr...?” Lifting a brow, I waited for him to offer a name.

“Paul Simmons. I was your grandmother’s neighbor. Heard you inherited the property.”

“I did.” I kept my voice calm, level, and sweet. I knew plenty about this guy, but he probably didn’t realize that.

His brow furrowed, obviously expecting more from my answer. “Well, I figure a girl like you isn’t interested in some run-down farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. Just wanted to let you know that I’d be happy to offer you a fair value for the place. Be kinda nice to have some extra acreage that butts right up to mine.”

Ashton leaned closer. "I don't think this is the place, Mr. Simmons."

The rancher dipped his head, not even bothering to remove his hat. "You're right. Unfortunately, I don't see Miss Dawson and I bumping shoulders in the near future."

Because we were from two very different worlds. Paul Simmons probably had on his only suit. I had a closet full of clothes just like this. There was a good chance he hadn't ever left the state - and certainly not the country. I'd spent years traveling the world. He hated anything new or different. I hated men just like him.

"I'm not interested," I said, trying to end the discussion.

"One point six," the man countered.

Ashton's hand pressed a bit harder into my back. Evidently that wasn't a number he'd expected. I just shook my head. "A hundred and thirty-five fenced acres? At one point six million dollars, that's not even the raw land value. Never mind the house, barn, and other property improvements, let alone mineral rights."

I turned back for the car, but Mr. Simmons wasn't ready to give up. "Ok, two even."

Ashton shot back, "Not the time or the place, sir."

"It's the best you're going to get." Mr. Simmons was following. "If you don't sell, we'll just have the county change the zoning laws and get your ag exemption pulled. Hasn't been a horse on that place in a long-ass time, and with so many buildings, it'll be hell to get back." He chuckled. "Sell me the land, Miss Dawson, because you can't afford to fight me."

I stopped so fast even Ashton almost tripped. "Is that what you think? Your big plan was to offer me a stupidly low figure for that land, and then try to *threaten* me? Do you have any idea who I am?" Then I smiled, but I was sure it looked a lot more like a snarl. "Don't pick a fight with me, sir. You'll lose."

"Don't think so, girl. You'll never get the permissions to re-open that place. There's no way you're bringing in a bunch

of juvenile delinquents into this town. Cats Peak isn't real fond of strangers, and I'm the one with all the connections."

"No," I promised. "You see, that's exactly where you're wrong. You know a few people. *I* am the one with the connections. Try me. I *dare* you."

When Mr. Simmons stepped closer, Ashton put a strong hand into his chest. "Don't even think about touching my girl, cowboy. I really don't care how much you want that land. I certainly don't care if you hate the center Vera Dawson made famous. If you're that adamant, have your attorney contact mine." He finally released me long enough to pull a card from his suit pocket with the hand not holding the arrogant cowboy back.

When he handed it to Paul Simmons, the man's face twisted in confusion. I tried hard not to laugh. Ashton Walker was an enigma. With the massive alpha male vibe he was throwing down, the last thing some country hick would expect was the company he not only worked for, but owned. Even from where I was standing, I could see the pale white card with a vivid magenta script.

Right about now, Paul Simmons was wondering if the rainbow-colored display I brought with me were gay activists. That was exactly what I wanted. Maybe Gran couldn't admit she'd been a lesbian while she was alive, but now that she was gone, there was no reason to be ashamed. No reason at all. The old woman had started a revolution and hidden it with color. My grandmother had given me and my friends the one thing no one else had: respect. She'd taught us that if we tried hard enough, nothing in the world could stop us. The least we could do was make sure it didn't go to waste.

"Take me home," I told Ashton. "Take me home and let me forget all of this for just a little bit?"

His strong arm curled around my shoulder. "Promise, sweetie. Told Gran I'd take real good care of you. That's my job. Yours is to keep this going."

SHADES OF TROUBLE

COLLIDE: BOOK 1

Chapter One



Three months later...

Trees huddled over the road, dappling the asphalt with shade as I pushed my Audi into the next corner. I was almost there. The drive from New York had been long and boring, leaving me exhausted and ready to be home. As the landmarks became familiar, I knew I was close. Another coffee would be nice, but I hoped it would be from Gran's espresso machine and not some cheap gas station crap.

Around the next corner, I looked over a pristine pasture, admiring the horses grazing in the sweltering sun. It was only a second. I'd barely taken my eyes away from the road, but when they returned, it was too late. Jerking the wheel made the car lurch to the side, but my tire still smashed right into the discarded two-by-four peeking over the shoulder. For a single breath, I hoped I hadn't ruined anything - then the tire began to thump and the dash lit up.

"Crap!"

I slowed down, limping the car around the next bend to a straight patch with something like a shoulder. Pulling over as far as I could, I stepped out to check the disaster. This stupid town had to be cursed.

When I got to the passenger side, I saw it was just the tire. The rest of the car looked fine, but it would probably need a trip to the shop to be sure. Grumbling under my breath, I reached back into the car for my phone, googling the number for roadside assistance. While the disturbingly chipper hold

music played, I leaned back against the door, hoping to catch a hint of a breeze. Late June in Texas was about the same temperature as hell.

“Roadside Service,” a woman finally answered.

“Hi, yeah, I’m on Farm to Market 1762, outside Bonham with a flat.”

“Mm.” The sound of a keyboard could be heard over the phone. “Do you have a spare?”

“Yep.”

While the woman kept making thoughtful noises, I again reached into my car and grabbed my hat. Twisting my hair up with one hand, I managed to tuck it under the newsboy-style cap, giving myself some relief from the oppressive heat. The woman on the other end didn’t seem to notice. She was still making those noises that said it was going to be a long-ass wait.

Finally, the dispatcher said, “Looks like I can have someone up there in about two hours.”

“What?!” Two hours? Not worth it! I groaned in frustration. “Ok, fine. Send them, but if I can change it myself, I’ll call to cancel.”

“All right, then I have a service truck en route to you. Please call back if you have any additional needs.”

I punched the button to end the call muttering, “Sure,” under my breath.

Tossing my phone back onto the passenger seat, I popped the trunk and pulled out the scissor jack. Setting that by the rear wheel, I went back for the spare, thwarted by the apparently empty trunk. I knew I had one - I’d made sure of it when I bought the car - but damned if I could see it, so I leaned a little farther in, looking for the false floor. Kicking one high-heeled foot behind me, I leaned as far into the trunk as I could.

Out here in the boonies, traffic was few and far between. A single car had passed when I was looking up the phone

number, but that was it. Naturally, as soon as I was ass up, another lumbered up from behind me. I chuckled, all too aware of the view the driver must be getting, but didn't care. These modern sports cars all had a secret compartment for the tiny little doughnut spare, and I was going to find it.

But the diesel slowed. Extracting myself from the bowels of my car, I looked up to see it crawling by in the wrong lane, giving me plenty of room. As soon as it was past, it darted back over - right to the shoulder - and stopped. Perfect. My first impression back in town would be that of a damsel in distress. Not quite what I'd planned.

The door of the big blue truck opened, releasing the sound of modern country music. A moment later, the driver stepped out. In my life, I'd seen a lot of really pretty men. Most of them were gay, but still. This guy was nothing like them. His chest was massive. His arms were thick. The way his jeans molded to his thighs proved that he had a lot of experience using them. My first thought was that Ashton would never let me live this down. Right on its heels, I realized that maybe there was something to the whole cowboy fetish.

"Having some trouble, ma'am?" he asked.

I just pressed a hand to my head. "Uh, yeah. I'm having a bad case of blonde. New car, and I have no clue where they hid the spare."

He nodded, walking around to the trunk to stand beside me. "Ah. Got a flat?"

"Yep. Hit that two-by-four in the road."

His eyes jerked to me but he ducked his head to hide the smile. "Me, too."

"Had to rub it in, didn't ya?" I teased, since clearly his truck wasn't damaged. "I have roadside assistance on the way, but it's gonna be a bit."

Without asking, the cowboy just reached into my trunk and lifted the false floor. "Yeah. Prolly three to four hours. Got a jack?"

So that's where my spare had been hiding! "By the back tire."

My good Samaritan heaved the replacement out with one arm - and what a *nice* arm it was. Trailing behind him like a lost puppy, I grabbed the jack and its handle, then followed, feeling a bit useless. At least from back here, I got a really nice view. It wasn't just his ass. His shoulders were pretty damned nice, too.

"This thing won't hold for too long." He knelt beside the ruined wheel. "Where ya headed?"

"Just up the road. Cats Peak."

His head jerked up and he met my eyes. I'd seen that vivid shade of green before. As a girl, I'd fantasized about it, but the man before me looked nothing at all like the boy I remembered. This couldn't be the same person, could it?

Slowly, the cowboy smiled. "Vera's granddaughter?"

"Yeah. Gotta finish some paperwork for the inheritance."

"Ah." He claimed the lug wrench and settled it on a nut. "You have her eyes."

"You knew Gran?"

He nodded, unable to speak while he broke the lug nuts free. In between, he managed, "Yep. Been taking care of the place. Live on the next property over. So I've known Vera for years." He paused, then looked up. "Knew. Sorry."

"Yeah." I wasn't quite ready to talk about Gran. "So, um... you got a name, cowboy?"

"Luke Barrett. How about you, princess?" The crooked smile proved he had no clue who I was.

I looked him over again, trying to make my memories mesh with the hunk before me. "Violet Dawson."

His attention returned to the wheel. "Mm. So what do people call you for short?"

"Violet."

He laughed, not even looking up. “Well, that’s a mouthful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess. Never really thought about it.”

Finished with the last of the bolts, he finally slid the jack under and began lifting my car. “This your first time to Cats Peak?”

“Nope. Lived here when I was younger. Well, middle school.”

“Don’t remember ya.” He yanked off the ruined tire and turned for the little replacement. “Homeschooled?”

“Something like that.” Time to shift the subject a bit. “There a place around here to get a new tire?”

Like a professional, he spun the wrench in his hands, securing the lug nuts back into place. “Yep. We got a grill, a feed store, a vet clinic, and a repair shop. Oh, and the gas station. That’s pretty much it.”

“Post office?”

He shook his head. “Next town over. So you stayin’ for a while?” The car began to sink as he extracted the jack.

I took it from him as soon as the car was free. “Few weeks, at least.”

“Gonna be bored up there in that big ol’ house alone. Most of us meet up at the grill in the evenings. No beer, but it’s as close to a bar as we get. Be happy to introduce you around.”

“Thanks,” I said, securing the tools back where I’d found them. I had no interest in becoming pals with these people. “Still gotta pack up Gran’s things and see how much work the place needs. Last time we talked, she said it wasn’t good.”

When I headed back for the tire, Luke beat me. A big, strong hand grabbed the edge and hiked it against his hip, not caring about the grease and dust. He gave me a knowing look, then turned for the truck he’d left idling on the side of the road.

“No need to mess up your new car, ma’am. I’ll just follow you up to Mike’s.”

For a moment I wasn’t sure if I was offended or flattered. “And what would I have done if you hadn’t come along?” The tone of my voice wasn’t exactly sweet.

He heaved the tire into the bed. “Cooked in that car while you waited for roadside service?” The smile he turned on me was charming. “Just tryin’ to be a gentleman, Miss Dawson. Not sure your nails could take the abuse and there’s not exactly a place in town to get them fixed.”

He had a point and I knew it. I didn’t like it, but I knew it. If it had been anyone else who’d stopped to help... “Ok, so how do I pay you back, Luke?”

Crossing his arms over his chest, the man leaned against his tailgate. It took everything I had not to drool. Damn, Luke had grown up nicely. That posture made his arms look larger than life. It also proved that his shirt was a smidge too tight. When his eyes drifted down to my shoes and back up, I barely noticed. Oddly, I also didn’t care.

“Let me buy ya lunch, and we’ll call it even.”

“No.” I lifted my chin to keep the smile at bay. “Mr. Barrett, this is the twenty-first century. You either work for it or pay for it. You don’t get both.”

“Miss Dawson, this is Cats Peak, Texas. Out here, we ain’t changed the calendars from the 1950s. Man’s pride takes a beating if he lets a woman pay.”

“I see.” I rubbed at a little grease on my hand. A gift from the jack. “Shame. I figured it’d hurt more getting turned down.”

He chuckled, the sound rich and deep, but pushed himself away from the back of his truck. For a moment I was confused, until he opened the back door of the cab and grabbed a rag. Inside, the country music was still going.

“Prolly would. So’s that your way of saying you’ll let me buy you lunch?”

“Nope.” I held my ground beside my passenger door. “That’s my ultimatum. I buy or I decline.”

Luke just walked right up to me and took my wrist, pulling my filthy hand out. “Good thing I have a whole lot of pride.” Gently, he wiped away the smudges inside my fingers. “Violet, this town’s gonna chew you up and spit you out. They don’t like anything new, and you’re a whole lot of new.”

“I am?”

He turned my wrist and traced one of my nails. “Stuff like this is in magazines. No one wears heels. Not even to church.”

“I don’t go to church.”

“Mhm.” His eyes slowly met mine. “And that’s gonna cause a few more problems, what with the rumors about Vera and all.”

“What rumors?”

He paused and I watched his eyes scan every detail of my face. “Dunno if it’s true, but some people said she was a lesbian.”

“Yeah?” And they were right. So what?

Luke just took a deep breath. “Well, after her friends all showed up and made some gay pride display at her funeral, there’s not gonna be a whole lot of sympathy.”

Slowly, I pulled my hand away. “Well, I guess Cats Peak is going to have to get used to it.”

“Violet, they’ll run you out of town on rails. Honey, these people don’t exactly break easily.”

“I don’t either.”

“You sure about that?” A smug eyebrow flicked up, taunting me. “Looks to me like you couldn’t even change a tire.”

I just leaned into his face. “Let me make this real clear, cowboy. I may look like a million bucks, but I’m not exactly some fragile little flower here to entertain you.”

He nodded once. “Good. Bev’s Grill is just up the way at the crossroad. You owe me lunch, Miss Dawson.”

“Asshole,” I grumbled, walking around to the driver’s door.

Luke stepped back, looking a little too pleased with himself. “Yes, ma’am. I sure am. That’s how I stay sane out here. I’ll be right behind ya.”

SHADES OF TROUBLE

COLLIDE: BOOK 1

Chapter Two



Luke

Climbing back into my truck, I cranked up the air. I had no idea how that girl could stand it, but she didn't even sweat! Then again, I wasn't completely convinced she was real. From the crystal-studded heels she wore while driving to the painted-on jeans, not to mention her perfect rose-colored lips - if I'd seen her in a picture, I'd swear it had been photoshopped.

She was not at all what I'd expected of Vera's granddaughter. Violet Dawson was *hot*. Her waist was so small my hands could probably fit all the way around without trying, but she still had a nice pair of tits. Oh yeah, I'd looked. Not even her billowy shirt could hide the tight curve of them - or her ass. At least I had an advantage there. Seeing it peeking out of her trunk did make the view easy - and made sure I didn't get caught looking. She was built like a pin-up girl, and twice as pretty.

Everything about her screamed big city, though. Everyone in Cats Peak was allergic to change. Conservative was the new modern out here and nothing about Violet was subtle. Oh sure, we had our fair share of rebellious teens, but between the church groups and the social pressures, those kids either grew out of it or moved away. Wouldn't take long before all three hundred people in town decided she was a pariah.

Not that I really understood it. No single thing about her was any different from the rest of the women I knew; she just happened to do it all better. She was gorgeous in a way men liked and women hated. Maybe that was the problem. Violet

Dawson was nothing but walking temptation and damned if I wasn't tempted. I had a real weakness for taking care of those delicate little girls, and this one was going to need my help.

When we reached the stop sign at the crossroad through town, she turned right and headed into the parking lot. There was no way to miss it. Cats Peak didn't have a whole city square. Everything in town was located in one little strip beside where the two main roads met up. This was it.

Without hesitation, her little white Audi stopped halfway between the repair shop and the grill. I found a spot a bit closer to Mike's, well aware that the tire for her car wasn't light. Granted, seeing her eyes drop to my arm was worth it, but before I turned off the truck, I glanced over in time to see her get out.

Damn, she looked good. She looked like sin incarnate. This town was really going to hate her.

It took one deep breath before I could safely get out of my truck without embarrassment. While she headed inside, I grabbed the tire and carried it into the open garage door. I knew where it went. There'd been many long nights spent leaning under a hood out here, sharing a beer. Then I hurried back inside to make sure Mike didn't rip her off.

"What kinda tire you need?" Mike asked, leaning across the chest-high counter to leer at her.

Violet just smiled sweetly, but I saw her eyes narrow slightly. "Isn't that your job? Do I get a discount if I do the work for you?" She flipped open her massive purple wallet to reveal a tablet tucked inside. "I'm not gonna be picky because I'm sure you don't have much in stock and I'd like to have it back by this afternoon."

"Mike," I said.

The mechanic just lifted a hand, refusing to look away from the too-pretty girl before him. "Honey, might have to put on a pair. Not sure I have anything that'll match."

"Seventeen-inch, low profile," I said, moving to her side. "You've got plenty. It's eighty bucks, Violet. Don't let Mike

jerk ya around.”

The girl had the audacity to smirk at the man behind the counter. “You prefer credit or an out of town check?”

Mike just groaned and pushed the card reader toward her. “Fuck you, Luke.”

“Keepin’ ya honest. I’m taking Miss Dawson over to Bev’s. Get the rim on by the time we’re back. If you’re too...” I made a point of looking around. “...Busy, I can put it back on her car.”

“So can I,” Violet said.

I leaned closer to her ear and dropped my voice. “Over my dead body.”

“That,” she replied, “can be arranged.”

I laughed and stepped away, heading to the sink behind the counter. The last thing I needed was brake dust all over my hands if I wanted to get close to her white shirt. While Mike rang her up, I scrubbed up to my elbows. By the time her receipt was printed, I was back at her side, steering her out with a hand on her back. She didn’t seem to even notice, letting me lead her next door like it was her idea all along.

Reaching out for the glass door to Bev’s, I said, “Hope you’re not a vegetarian.”

The little bells tied to the push-rail tinkled as it opened, and everyone inside turned to look. Beside me, Violet just kept going. Her heels clicked on the tile like a snare drum, sparkling in the overhead lights. She didn’t even bother to turn as she answered.

“I like meat just fine. Don’t worry, cowboy - Vera didn’t pass that on.”

I couldn’t help it. The laugh just fell out. From the little bob of her head, I knew that was exactly what she’d intended. Unfortunately, it made us the center of attention. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but seeing Paul Simmons on the far side of the room, I had a feeling I shouldn’t like it.

“So,” I said, stepping to the counter. “Bev makes some amazing burgers, but breakfast is her specialty, and dinner’s all country.”

Violet bit her lip, watching me intently. “In other words, the rest isn’t worth eating?”

“Never said that.”

“Gotcha.” Then she turned to Mandy, the girl behind the counter. “Cheeseburger, no mayo, extra tomatoes, and whatever he’s having.”

I ordered a variation of the same and reached for my back pocket, but the city girl was too fast. Before I could work it out of my jeans, she had her card out and swiped, smiling sweetly for the receipt. I just sighed and accepted my defeat, snagging the pair of paper cups for our drinks.

“Least ya didn’t order a salad,” I said, handing her a cup.

She shrugged and pressed it beneath the dispenser for flavored water. Inwardly I groaned, aware that she was just a bit too quiet. There was no way my bad joke had pissed her off. Had it?

“Violet?”

The tip of her tongue darted between her lips to moisten them. “I happen to like salads.”

“Not here, ya wouldn’t.” There, that was safe enough. “Pretty sure it’s full of something that’d kill ya. I dunno, like botulism.”

“Uh huh.”

“Serious,” I insisted, leading her to a booth by the windows. “Happen to know lettuce isn’t supposed to be brown.”

“That’s just gross.”

I nodded, reclaiming my rank of savior. “Kinda my point.”

Then our food arrived. The little plastic baskets were a staple in Bev’s Grill. Unfortunately, before the waitress could even make it back behind the counter, Paul Simmons decided

it was a good time to greet the new girl. He paused at the end of our table and leaned over, forgetting all the manners his mother must have taught him.

“Hey, Luke. You get the bins refilled for the cows down on Robertson Road?”

Great. Violet'd be real impressed now, hearing that I was the damned cow feeder. Exactly what a girl like her was looking for in a man. “Yes, sir. Finished up a bit ago and was headed back when I rescued Miss Dawson here from the side of the road.”

Mr. Simmons turned his gaze on her. “I see. Going to be staying long, Miss Dawson?”

She leaned back and shoved a fry between her heavily painted lips. “That's the plan. Not that it's really any business of yours.”

His eyes narrowed. “Offer still stands.”

“Offer's a piece of shit,” she shot back. “I assure you, if I decide to sell Southwind, I'll have my agent contact you.”

“No need to lose fifteen percent with an agent.” Mr. Simmons gave her a sleazy smile, probably unaware of how disturbing he looked. “I'd be more than happy to work with you.”

She reached for another fry. “Still not selling, and you're ruining my appetite.”

“How about the back pasture? I just need a few more acres, what with the droughts and all.”

“No.” She tried to turn her attention back to me, but Paul Simmons wasn't ready to quit.

He leaned closer, hovering right over her meal. “County Assessor comes out in a month. Be a shame if someone told him there's no agriculture being produced over there. How high you think your taxes'll jump, girl?”

With those long, blue nails, she pushed right into the middle of his chest, guiding him back. I could see the dents she left in the cotton of his shirt. It took everything I had not to

chuckle. Maybe I needed to rethink my first impression of her. This dainty little city girl wasn't bothered in the least by Mr. Simmons' threats.

"I think my recent inheritance of the land, Gran's eighteen months of hospitalization, and all those extenuating circumstances will be taken into consideration when we take this to court." She smiled at him like she honestly wasn't worried. For a moment, I even thought her kindness was real, but the ice in her eyes gave it away. "Now didn't your mother ever teach you that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

When she flicked a hand to dismiss him, I damn near lost it. From the look on Mr. Simmons' face, that was not at all what he'd expected. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite finished.

"Let me be blunt, Violet. This is the best offer you're going to get. Take it, or things are going to get real ugly. There's a lot of things I'm sure you'd hate to get out."

She just shrugged. "If you mean that Vera's buried beside the woman who should have been her wife? Please, make sure everyone knows."

"No." He took a step back. "That's not at all what I mean. You think the state is really going to let you run a place like that? A girl like you? Just look at how your mother turned out."

Without another word, he turned and left. It was Violet's mad scrambling for her phone that made me look over. Even under layers of makeup, she was pale. Too pale. I had no idea what threat Paul Simmons had just made, but evidently it was a good one.

Without even a fake apology, she pressed the phone to her face. It only took a second before her eyes unfocused as someone answered on the other end. "Cyan?"

Across the table, I could hear the bass of a man's voice.

Violet nodded unconsciously at whatever he'd said. "Good to know. Hey, I need a favor. Get with Shawn and run my records? Yeah, I don't have his new number yet. Sure, text me

that, but I need everything public. If that's boring, tell him to see what my mother has been up to." She paused. "Nah, he knows. Yeah. And I'd love anything you can get on Paul Simmons. He's already trying to stop Southwind." Then her eyes flicked up and landed right on me. "I also need a history on Luke Barrett. Yep. Says he knew Gran. K. Love ya, babe. Bye, sweetie."

"Boyfriend?" I asked when she set the phone down.

Violet shook her head. "Old friend of mine. We kinda went to school together."

"Mm." I couldn't pretend to ignore what she'd said. "I think I have three speeding tickets. All between here and Dallas. Public intox on my juvie records, but that's sealed."

She picked up another fry, paused, then dropped it back into the basket. "I didn't ask for a criminal check."

I felt the muscles in my jaw tense. "Fine. Dropped out of high school my junior year. Work for Paul Simmons feeding his cattle. Pull a few jobs with Mike every so often to make ends meet. Anything else you want to know, Miss Dawson?"

Her face was serene, as if the anger boiling in the back of my mind didn't bother her at all. I knew she could hear it in my voice, but the fancy bitch just looked at me for a few seconds too long. Well, that was all I was going to give her. If she wanted to know about all the mistakes I'd made in my life, then she could find them herself. When I tensed to stand, those heather-grey eyes of hers flicked to the window.

"How'd you know Gran?"

I paused. "I worked on her place."

"You think I should sell?"

I glanced over my shoulder, checking to see where my boss had gone, then relaxed back into the chair. "No. I think Vera would understand if you did, but no. I think it's amazing that you're trying to help out kids who get caught between a rock and a hard place. Just like Vera helped me."

"She what?" Her mouth fell open in shock.

I finally picked up my burger. “Yep. That’s how I ended up helping her. Got kicked out at seventeen and she taught me enough so I could get my own place and a stable job. Same one I got now. Granted, if Mr. Simmons knew all that, I’d be out on my ass and there’s not a whole lot of work out here.”

Violet giggled. It was not at all what I’d expected. Everything about her was immaculate and planned, like some movie starlet. Before this moment, I never would have been able to imagine a giggle coming from those lips - but it did.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Soon as you’re done with the cows? Come over.” Then she flipped open her tablet-wallet thing and pulled out a pretty lavender business card. “If you can’t make it before lunch, text. Mine’s the number at the bottom.” Then she pushed her untouched burger away and slid off the bench. “Looks like my car’s done. Thanks for the rescue, Mr. Barrett.”

“My pleasure, Miss Dawson.”

I twisted in the booth to watch her walk away, enjoying the view. Maybe I was imagining it, but it looked like she put a little extra sway in each step. The hem of her thin white shirt swung tantalizingly across the base of her ass like it was teasing me. When the chime on the door tinkled, I turned my attention to the card. It was not at all what I’d expected. The letters were written in a dark, almost hot-pink color.

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Yeah. Cats Peak, Texas, was going to hate this girl, and I planned to enjoy every second of it. It was about time for these small-town idiots to get a taste of their own medicine, and I wanted a front-row seat. Glancing to the window, I watched her shake Mike’s hand before pulling open her car door. For a split second, I tried to imagine what lingerie she had on under those skin-tight jeans.

That was when she pulled off the cap. A pastel rainbow tumbled free, falling to the middle of her back in soft waves and a myriad of colors. I couldn't help but smile. Fuck lingerie. I didn't even know what color her hair was, but I knew it was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. When my gaze returned to her face, I realized she was looking back. Through two panes of glass, our eyes met. Then she tilted her head as if to say, "And?"

All I could do was nod, hoping she knew exactly how much I liked it. Damn, that girl was hot. She was also trouble, and I was an expert on getting into that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As you would expect, Kitty Cox has a love of cats, but also dogs, horses, and pretty much any animal. She's always enjoyed a good love story. A chance meeting involving a martini, a margarita, and some laughs with another author convinced her to finally put words to paper - and now she can't seem to stop.

From the sweet and tender idea of second chance romances, to the hot and dirty thrill of stories intended for adult audiences, the wonders of falling in love are where her imagination goes. She likes to blame it on the hot and spicy climate of her home town in Texas. Then again, it could just be a result of growing up on stolen romance novels hidden under her pillow at night.

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