

Chapter One

The young woman emerged from the taxi, her appearance as wispy as the fog that shrouded the railroad station that loomed behind her. The driver, a bulky Hispanic man with slicked back hair growing ever slicker with the icy drizzle, hopped out of the cab, and ran to her side. Speaking to her gently, he handed off her luggage: a large plain black suitcase with wheels and a turquoise silken scarf woven about the handles, and an over-sized brightly colored carry-on. Carefully removing the delicate scarf, the driver snapped the wheelie luggage handle in place, handing it to the young woman with her bulky carry on. She smiled wanly, struggling to hoist the carry-on over her weary shoulder. Once settled, she wound the scarf about her long black hair and pulled a train ticket from a pocket within her sarong. She pointed to her destination: “Wild River?” She asked with a heavy Asian accent.

“Yes, ma’am. Track Number 7. Right over there,” the cab driver answered with a broad smile and a nod of his head. “Can’t miss it.”

Dusk was descending. The rain had stopped, and the young woman, her small nose pressed against the glass, gazed at the speeding Wyoming landscape in excitement and wonder. The sun painted the sky and the mountains in exploding shades of red and pink and orange. The sky looked on fire like Bangkok during the King’s Birthday Celebration or New Year’s Eve. Still, along with her glee, there lurked a deep sadness and around the edges of her heart—fear. What had she done?

Weston Beaudurant, squinting into the rising sun, his steel blue eyes the color of Big Horn Lake's water, sat atop the hood of his 1992 Ford F 250, the pick-up that had been a gift from his daddy when he'd turned 16, now close to twenty years ago.

Zebadiah Chantry, his best friend since they were school kids, watched Weston without expression. Zeb pointed at a fence post about 50 feet away. "That one?" Zebadiah asked.

"Nope," Weston responded, pointing to a fence post that was closer to 100 feet from where they sat. "That one."

Weston slid from the car hood, whipped his right arm into the air, his whirling lasso splintering the rising dawn, and let the rope fly. The lariat neatly snagged the post.

Zebadiah slapped his knee. "Got 'em!"

"Now, Zebadiah, just what did you expect?" He coiled in the rope as in the distance thunder rippled.

Suddenly, a piercing whoop broke across the plain. Weston and Zebadiah turned to see Cody Goode streaking across the range astride his Palomino executing a series of screwball riding tricks.

As Cody galloped fiercely toward them, Weston climbed back atop the pick-up hood and unhurriedly unfurled his lasso. Grinning, Cody barreled straight for them.

Weston threw the lasso, pinning his mark.

"Ah, Wes," Cody whined. "Whatcha gotta do that for? I was just practicin' for the rodeo!"

When the boys reached the stadium, passing underneath a banner that read: CHESHOLM BROTHERS RODEO - CHEYENNE, WYOMING, the place was buzzing with activity. Cowboys and cowgirls of every stripe were pouring in to register. The boys knew most of them from the circuit, though some were fresh-faced and new – some so painfully young it made Zebadiah wince. They looked like they should be riding for the junior rodeo—or was it him that should be signing up for the senior contest already. Jehoshaphat. That made him shudder. How many more of these did he have left in him to ride?

As Weston headed for the bull-riding sign-ups, he saw Jack Deerstalker, the young mixed-blood Shoshone, making his way towards him with the medicine man Mad Bull Thunder Gatherer right beside him..

“Hey, Wes,” Jack greeted him.

“Jack. You ridin’?”

“Thought I might.”

“Wes,” Mad Bull greeted him. “Fellas.”

Weston began moving moved on towards the stock building where the sign-ups were held.

“Hey, Wes,” Jack called to him. “If I can get a few moments with you later...?”

“Sure, Jack. You know where to find me.”

The stock building was long, cavernous and lined with pens that held the stock the cowboys and cowgirls would ride and rope in the festivities: broncos, bulls, calves. At one end a desk was set up with a makeshift sign that read: RODEO REGISTRATION. Weston, Zebadiah and Cody made their way quickly to the desk.

A white-haired cowboy with hands worn to leather handed Weston a card with a number on it, whistling as Weston took it. "You pulled a mean bull, Wes."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Baby Face. I ain't puttin' any money on you this time."

"I think I'll do okay, Roy. With or without your money."

At that moment, a young Hispanic man, Miguel Fillepe walked by. "Hey, Wes," Miguel hailed.

"Hey, Miguel. How's the knee?" Weston responded.

"Okay. Only hurts when I'm asleep or awake."

Weston smiled at Miguel as he and Zeb and Cody moved on to get Zebediah registered.

"You hear Miguel's saying if the Shoshone build that casino, he's gonna block the road to the reservation?" Zebediah said as they walked.

Cody chimed in, "And Rick Snowdown's spreadin' it around that if Miguel blocks the road, he's gonna blow up his land."

"Ah, hell! Those two cowpokes'll do anythin' just to get each other's goat."

"I dunno, Wes. I think it's more'n that." Zebediah added.

"Nothing we can do about it. It's a Shoshone issue."

"Everybody else's pokin' their nose in," Cody piped in.

"Exactly the problem," Weston said, leading the way to the next table.

The day of the Fremont County Rodeo dawned dazzling clear, a minor miracle and a cause of great cheer as the two weeks prior had been dark and gloomy, the clouds stubbornly clinging to Square Top and her surrounding peaks, casting a pall over the good folks of Wind River and the

entire County. Winter clothes were dug out of storage, turtle necks begrudgingly pulled on and folks predicting snow and the first time ever cancelation of the Fremont County Rodeo. But Mother Nature had other ideas, and the sun burst out behind Square Top so radiantly, the winter clothes were thrust back into storage and summer clothes and sunglasses triumphantly returned.

The fairgrounds stadium was flooded with attendees. Olive Chantry, Weston's sister and Zebadiah's wife had arrived early. She'd driven the boys, Zeb and Wes, and staked her claim in the bleachers just after dawn. She hadn't stayed seated in the stadium—they lived just close enough where Olive could drive back and forth. She'd arrived back just before 9 A.M. and the first qualifying events, which were for the women—Barrel Racing, Breakaway Roping, where the calf didn't have to be tied, and Calf Roping where it did. Every year for eight years Olive had followed this routine: bringing the boys to the rodeo just after dawn, staking out the seats for the Beaudurant-Chantry clan, knowing she could travel back and forth if the sun got too hot, or if the rain got too hard. But every year, once she arrived at the rodeo, she never left.

She'd been a pretty good horsewoman herself once upon a time, barrel racing her specialty. She'd never been as good a rider as Wes—it was like he'd been born astride a horse, and watching him ride a bull was terrifying and mystifying and electrifying. But she could hold her own at the rodeo, taking first more than once in barrel racing. She'd ridden in charity events and school events and junior rodeo, and even toyed with the idea of joining the rodeo circuit, but it'd never happened. She didn't know if it was because of her lack of will, because of some kind of fear of the competition, or simply just because of circumstances.

Olive was tall like her brother, and had his same dark Mediterranean skin color, their mother's Mediterranean skin. But she also had her mother's almond shaped Mediterranean eyes—so dark they were almost black where Wes had inherited their Dad's dark blue ones. She

was four years younger than Wes, four years behind him and Zeb in high school. She'd been in love with Zebadiah Chantry as long as she could remember—probably from the first moment he spiked her milk with a six-spotted fishing spider. She couldn't've been more than eight or nine years old then; Zeb was a big grown-up, 12 or 13, and hardly noticed her except to tease her to distraction. Being four years younger certainly didn't help when she entered high school or followed the boys out to the U at Laramie. But then, when Wes had to leave in the middle of his sophomore year, well, that pretty much changed things. Wes's leaving was like Zeb'd lost his right arm. And suddenly, there was Olive.

Getting together with Zeb...that pretty much took the rodeo out of her. Not only was having one rodeo chasing fool in a family enough--after all, somebody had to hold down the fort-- but Olive found barrel racing and lasso throwing and calf roping, not to mention marching in the grand parade, as adrenalin-pumping and ego-boosting as all that was, just no longer what she wanted. What she found was the guy standing right beside her was all the adrenalin-pumping, ego-boosting she needed. Zebadiah Chantry in her life simply made everything else make sense.

“Hey, Olive!” The deep throaty Hallo! of Wynona Velez, Olive's best friend and one of the county's only defense lawyer's broke into her reverie.

“Hey, Wy!” Olive shouted cheerfully back, waving her American flag.

Wynona suddenly spotted somebody in the crowd, and her voice boomed again.
“Bull! Over here!”

Mad Bull pushed through the throng toward Wynona and Olive.

“Hey, Olive,” he said as he sat down, taking off his fedora and wiping at his sweating forehead with a red bandana. “Your brother better do good today. I got fifty bucks on him.”

“You see how good Zeb did this morning?” Olive pulled out a stack of bills from her pocket.

“You’re not puttin’ that on your brother?” Bull asked.

“More like on a new washing machine!” Olive responded with a laugh.

“You put that on Wes, you’ll be buying fifty new washing machines.” Bull said.

In the arena below them, a cowboy finished his bull ride as the buzzer sounded.

“Not bad, Kip. Eighty-five. Let’s hear it for Kip Kipland, everybody!”

A smattering of applause broke out in the stands as rodeo clowns rushed onto the grounds to roust the bull back to the chutes.

“Next up, from the beautiful state of Wyoming, from the lovely county of Fremont, our own Weston Beaudurant....”

On the announcement of Weston’s name, the crowd roared. Olive rose, waving her flag vigorously and screaming for her brother more loudly than anyone else. “Come on, Weston! Show these folks how to ride!” She turned to Mad Bull. “You sit back and watch your fifty bucks multiply for all of us!”

“Uh-oh. Looks like Wes pulled himself a tough draw. He’ll be ridin’ Baby Face!” The announcer crackled over the loud speaker.

At the chutes, Weston straddled Baby Face as Zeb helped Weston lash his hand securely to the beast. The Brahma snorted and pawed the ground impatiently, attempting to twist his massive head inside the tight confines of the chute.

As they worked, Cody, dressed in the full regalia of a rodeo clown, grabbed hold of the chute gate.

“Ready?” Cody asked Weston.

Weston, making sure his hand was secure, looked back at Cody. “Let's go!”

With a quick nod, Cody stepped back and opened the bull pen gate.

Head down, like a fiend released from the gates of Hell, Baby Face charged out of the pen, nostrils flaring.

“My money's on you, Wes!” Cody called out after him.

The beast was savage. His great body torqued and undulated, his front legs clawing at the air as his body rose to the sky, his hindquarters kicking out behind him. Weston clung to the Brahma, his own body as fluid as the bull's, his legs muscled and powerful, but the cowboy was no match for the monster, and before the third second passed, with one prodigious kick that sent the bull's nose scraping the hardscrabble ground, the Brahma hurled Weston to the dirt.

The throw was brutal, skittering Weston across the ground. He slid forcefully all along his right side and shoulder. The crowd groaned in unison, and in unison they rose.

Baby Face cantered across the arena, circling Weston where he lay stunned. Cody sprinted out of the chutes waving his arms, his legs flying, followed by a multitude of clowns, swaying, yelling, cavorting, and caterwauling to distract and corral the Brahma.

Suddenly, Baby Face stopped circling. He pawed the earth and lifted his colossal head to the sky. He snorted, and then, he charged, straight for Cody Goode.

Seeing the bull stampeding, Cody bolted toward the gate, running in the zigzag pattern he'd been taught, he'd utilized, that had saved him countless times before. But the Brahma bounded with lightning speed—how could something so cumbersome, so massive, so ungainly move so quickly, so lethally. Before Cody could reach safety, Baby Face reached him, butting him viciously. Cody spun up into the air, spiraling through the sky like a kite on a string.

Weston, one hand pressed against his rib cage, pushed to his feet. At the chutes, Zeb leapt into the arena, Olive's voice crying out to him from the stands, imploring him to stay back, stay away! In the air, Cody twisted grotesquely, his body folding back upon itself, a scarecrow, a bird clipped of its wings, landing with a heart-wrenching thud to the dusty earth, then, lying stone still on the ground, like a rag doll.

Weston and Zeb rushed up to their friend, their faces drawn and pale, Weston limping visibly. A thin stream of blood trickled from Cody's nostrils. Weston, his face contorted with the effort, knelt down beside Cody. He lifted his head onto his lap.

Cody's body sagged heavy and lifeless. Zeb bowed his head, placing one hand upon Weston's shoulder as the boyhood friends fought tears in the bright October sunshine.