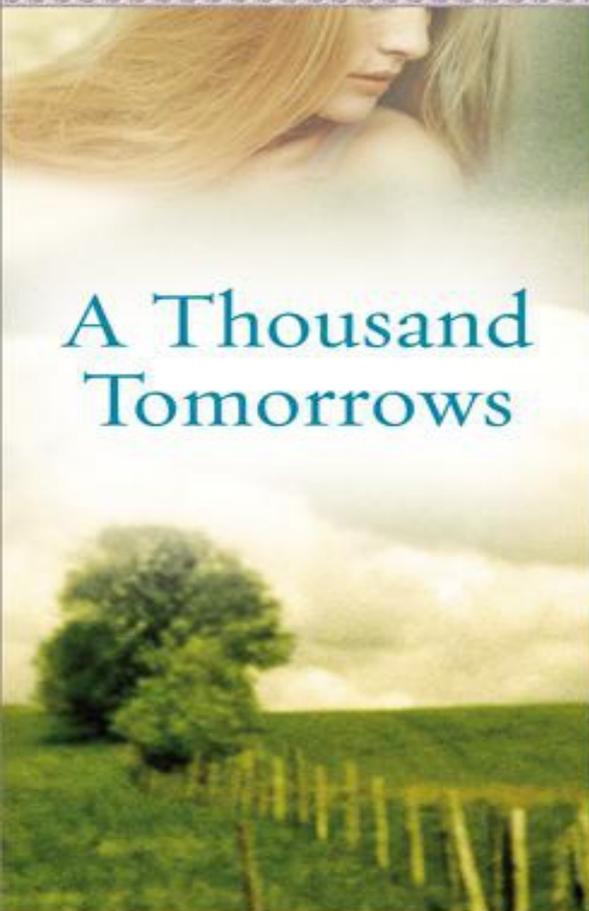
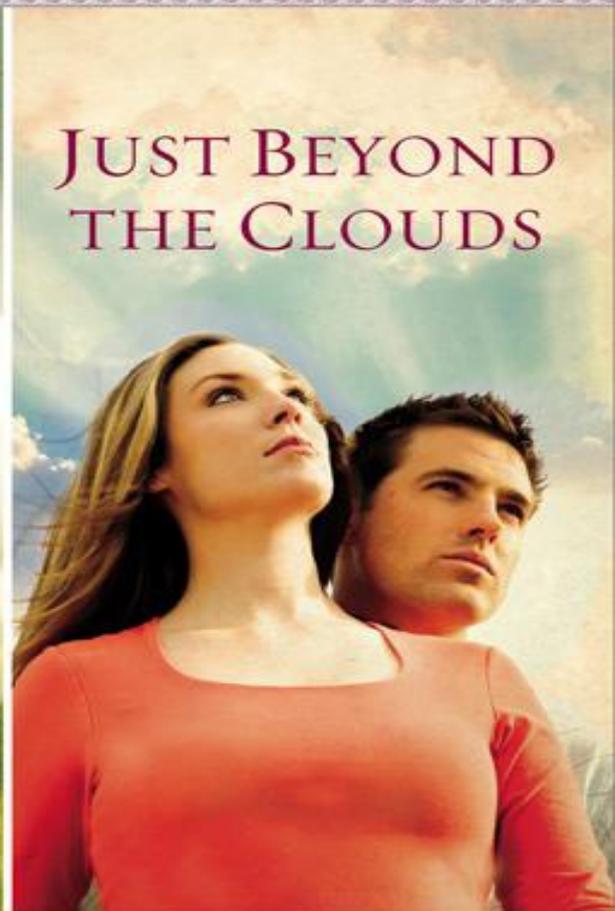


New York Times Bestselling Author

KAREN KINGSBURY



*A Thousand
Tomorrows*



*JUST BEYOND
THE CLOUDS*

2-Novels-in-1 Value Edition

KAREN KINGSBURY



A Thousand Tomorrows

Just Beyond the Clouds



New York Boston Nashville



A Thousand Tomorrows

DEDICATED TO...

Donald, my Prince Charming: The dance is a beautiful one; I only wish the music would play forever.

Kelsey, my forever laughter: Thanks for letting me into the most tender places of your heart.

Tyler, my sweetest song: When the spotlight hits you, honey, your dad and I will be there in the front row.

Sean, my silly heart: It feels like you've been in my heart forever.

Josh, my gentle giant: Our plan was two adopted Haitian boys; God's plan was three. I'm so glad He brought you to us.

EJ, my chosen one: Watching you come into your own, growing and stretching with the years, has been one of my greatest blessings.

Austin, my miracle boy: Your days are speeding by, precious youngest child. I can't slow the march of time, but you remind me I can savor every beat.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

[Acknowledgments](#)

Novels do not come together without a great deal of help. For that reason, I'd like to thank several people who helped make *A Thousand Tomorrows* possible.

First, a special thanks to Maureen Egen and Rolf Zettersten for taking me under your wing at Center Street and believing that maybe the whole world needed to know about this story. Your encouragement and faith in me have made all the difference. I appreciate you more than you know. Also, a thanks to my other friends at Center Street, especially my editor, Leslie Peterson, and my publicist, Andrea Davis. You are amazing in the way you think outside the box. I'm grateful beyond measure to be working with you.

Also, thanks to the people who helped lend credibility to this novel. A year ago, I shared a cross-country airplane ride with professional bull rider Ross Coleman. That four-hour conversation became the inspiration for Cody Gunner, the main character in *A Thousand Tomorrows*. Since that conversation, Ross Coleman and his family, along with dozens of rodeo competitors, cowboys, and professional bull riders including the all-time great Tuff Hedeman, helped make the world of rodeo real to me, and for that I am grateful. You lent accuracy to this story; any errors in detail are mine.

In addition, a thanks to those who shared their cystic fibrosis stories and information. I join you in praying for a cure for this disease, and for believing that in time research and funding will continue to add tomorrows every day.

Thank you to my family, especially Donald and the kids, who don't mind tuna sandwiches and quesadillas two weeks straight when I'm on deadline. You're the best support system I could ever have! Thanks also to my mother, Anne Kingsbury, who is my assistant and best friend. And a thanks to my dad, Ted Kingsbury, who continues to be my greatest encourager.

In addition I'd like to thank my friends and family who surround me with love and prayer and encouragement, especially Susan Kane, Trish Kingsbury, Lynne Groten, Ann Hudson, Sylvia Wallgren, Sonya Fitzpatrick, Teresa Thacker, Kathy Santschi, Melinda Chapman, Christine Wessel, Vicki and Randy Graves, Marcia Bender, and so many others.

A special thanks to my agent, Rick Christian, at Alive Communications. You are brilliant at all you do, acting in so many roles as you lead me in this writing adventure. You care deeply about my career, but more than that, you care about me in my role as a wife and mother. Thanks for working out the details with that in mind. You're amazing, and I'm the most thankful author in the world to be working with you.

Mary Williams never saw it coming.

She became Mike Gunner's wife the summer of 1972, back when love was all the world needed, big enough to solve any problem. So big no one imagined it might end or die or drop off suddenly the way the muddy Mississippi River did ten yards out.

The wedding was small, held on a hillside in Oxford not far from Ole Miss, a stone's throw from the grassy football field where Mike had been king. Marriage, they told themselves, wouldn't mean losing their independence. They were just adding another layer to their relationship, something more diverse, more complex. As a reminder, during the ceremony they each held something that symbolized themselves—Mary, a book of poetry; Mike, a football.

A football.

Looking back that should've been a sign, because football was Mike's first love, and what sort of man could be married to two lovers? But at the time—with half the guests in flowing tie-dyed gowns and flower wreaths—holding a football and a book of poetry seemed hip and new, a spit in the face of tradition and marital bondage. No three-piece suits and starched aprons for Mike and Mary.

Mike had an NFL contract with the Atlanta Falcons, and a pretty new house a few miles from the stadium. Mary was a runaway, so leaving Biloxi meant cutting ties that were already frayed. They would live as one, him in a Falcons uniform, her with a pen and paper, ready to capture the deep phrases and rhymes that grew in the soil of her heart.

Babies? They would wait five years at least. Maybe ten. She was only nineteen, a child herself. Marriage would mean finding new and heightened ways to love each other. Sundays cheering from the stands while her husband blazed a trail down the football field, and lazy Tuesdays, barefoot and sipping coffee while she recited to him her latest creation.

That was the plan, anyway.

But God didn't get the memo, because Mary was pregnant three months later and gave birth to a baby boy shortly before their first anniversary. Cody William Gunner, they called him. Little Codester. Mary put away the pen and paper and bought a rocking chair. She spent her days and most nights walking a crying baby, heating up bottles, and changing diapers.

"Sorry I'm not around more," Mike told her. He wasn't used to babies. Besides, if he wanted to keep up, he needed more time at the field house, more reps with the weights, more hours on the track.

Mike told him she didn't mind, and the funny thing was, she really didn't. Life was good at home. Mike was happy about being a father, because Cody was all boy from the moment he was born. His first word was *ball*, and Mike bought him a pair of running shoes months before he could walk.

The years that followed were a blur of vibrant reds and happy yellows. Mike was coming into his own, each season showing him faster, more proficient at catching the long bomb. There had been no warning, no sign that life was about to fall apart.

In the spring of 1978, when Cody was nearly five, Mary learned she was expecting again. Still, it wasn't the coming baby, but a bad catch one October Sunday that changed everything. Mike was all alone, ten yards away from the nearest defender, when he reached for the sky, grabbed the ball and came down at an angle that buckled his knees.

A torn anterior ligament, the hospital report showed. Surgery was scheduled; crutches were ordered. "You'll miss a season," the doctor told him. "To be honest, I'm not sure you'll ever run the same again."

Six weeks later Mary gave birth to Carl Joseph.

From the beginning, Carl was different. He didn't cry the way Cody had, and he slept more than usual. His fussiest moments were during feeding time, when milk from the bottle would leak out his nose while he was eating, causing him to choke and sputter and cough.

Mike would look at him and get nervous. "Why's he doing that?"

"I'm not sure." Mary kept a burp rag close by, dabbing at the baby's nose and convincing herself nothing was wrong. "At least he isn't crying."

Either way, Mike wanted to be gone. As soon as he could, he got back to the training room, working harder than ever to make the knee well again. By the next fall, he was cleared to play, but he was more than a second slower in the forty.

"We'll try you at special teams, Gunner," the coach told him. "You've got to get your times down if you want your spot back."

His future suddenly as shaky as his left knee, Mike began staying out with the guys after games, drinking and coming home with a strange, distant look in his eyes. By the time Carl Joseph was two, Mike was cut from the Falcons. Cut without so much as a thank you or a good-luck card.

By then they knew the truth about Carl Joseph.

Their second son had Down syndrome. His condition came with a host of problems, feeding issues, developmental and speech delays. One morning Mary sat Mike down at the breakfast table.

"You never talk about Carl Joseph." She put her hands on her hips. "You act like he has the flu or something."

Mike shrugged. "We'll get him therapy; he'll be fine."

"He won't be fine, Mike." She heard a crack in her voice. "He'll be this way forever. He'll *live* with us forever."

It was that last part that caught Mike's attention. He said nothing significant at the time, nothing Mary could remember. But that summer, he was gone more than he was home. Always his story was the same. He was traveling the country looking for a tryout, getting a few weeks' look in one city and then another, working out with a handful of teams, trying to convince coaches he hadn't lost a step, hadn't done anything but get stronger since his injury.

But one weekend morning, when Mike was still asleep in their bedroom, Mary found a Polaroid picture in his duffle bag. It was of him in a bar surrounded by three girls, one on each knee, one draped over his shoulder.

When Mike woke up, Mary was in the kitchen ready to confront him. He would have to stop traveling, stop believing his next contract was a tryout away. Bars would be a thing of the past, because she needed him at home, helping out with the boys. Money was running out. If football had nothing more to offer, he needed to find a job, some other way to support them. She had her speech memorized, but it was all for nothing.

He took control of the conversation from the moment he found her at the kitchen table.

"This..." He tossed his hands and let them fall limp at his sides. His eyes were bloodshot. "This isn't what I want anymore."

"What?" She held up the Polaroid. "You mean this?"

Anger flashed in his eyes. He snatched the picture from her, crumpled it, and slammed it into the trash can. The look he gave her was cold, indifferent. He gritted his teeth. "What I do outside this house is my business."

She opened her mouth, but before she could tell him he was wrong, he slid his wedding ring from his left hand and dropped it on the table between them.

"It's over, Mary. I don't love you anymore."

Carl's cry sounded from upstairs. Slow and monotone, the cry of a child who would always be different. Mary looked up, following the sound. Then she found Mike's eyes again. "This isn't about me." She kept her tone calm, gentle. "It's about you."

A loud breath escaped his lips. "It's not about me."

"It is." She sat back, her eyes never leaving his. "You were on top of the world before you got hurt; now you're out of work and afraid." Compassion found a place in her voice. "Let's pull together, Mike." She stood, picked up his ring, and held it out to him. "Let me help you."

Carl's crying grew louder.

Mike closed his eyes. "I can't..." His words were a tortured whisper. "I can't stay here. I can't be a father to him, Mary. Every time I look at him, I... I can't do it."

Mary felt the blood drain from her face and the cheap linoleum turn liquid beneath her feet. What had he said? This was about Carl Joseph? Precious Carl, who never did anything but smile at Mike and long to be held by him?

Mary's scalp tingled, and the hairs on her arms stood straight up. "You're saying you can't stay married to

because of... because of Carl Joseph?"

"Don't say it like that." He pinched the bridge of his nose and hung his head.

Carl's crying grew still louder.

"But that's it, right?" The truth was exploding within her, spraying shrapnel at her heart and soul and leaving scars that would stay forever. "You want out because you can't be a father to Carl Joseph. Or because you're embarrassed by him. Because he's not perfect."

"I'm already packed, Mary. I called a cab; I'm flying to California and starting over. You can have the house; I'll send money when I get a job."

In a small, less important part of her mind, Mary wondered where Cody was, why he was so quiet. But she couldn't act on her curiosity. She was too busy reminding herself to breathe. "You're leaving because your son has Down syndrome? Do you hear yourself, Mike?"

But he was already headed back up the stairs.

When he left the house ten minutes later, he mumbled a single good-bye to no one in particular. Cody came tearing into the entryway from the living room, his eyes wide, forehead creased with worry.

"Dad, wait!" Cody ran out the door, his untied tennis shoes flopping with every step.

Carl Joseph in tow, Mary followed, horrified at the scene playing out. The cab waited out front, and without turning back, Mike helped the driver load both his suitcases into the trunk.

Cody stopped a few feet away, chest heaving. "Dad, where are you going?"

Mike hesitated, his eyes on Cody. "Never mind."

"But Dad—" Cody took a step closer. "When're you coming home?"

"I'm not." He looked at Mary and back at Cody. "This is it, son." Mike moved toward the passenger door. "Be good for your mama, you hear?"

"But Dad... I got a baseball game Friday; you promised you'd be there!" The boy was frantic, his words breathless and clipped. "Dad, don't go!"

Mike opened the door of the cab.

"Wait!" Mary stormed barefoot across the damp grass toward the cab. Carl Joseph stayed behind, rooted in one spot, watching, his thumb in his mouth. Mary jabbed her finger in the air. "You can't leave now, Mike. Your son's talking to you."

"Don't do this, Mary." Mike shot her a warning look. He lowered himself a few inches toward the passenger seat. "I have nothing to say."

"Dad!" Cody looked from Mike to Mary and back again. "What's happening; where're you going?"

Mike bit his lip and gave a curt nod to Cody. "Good-bye, son."

"Fine!" Mary screamed the word, her voice shrill and panicked. "Leave, then." She bent over, her knees shaking. Tears ran in rivers down her face. "Go ahead and leave. But if you go now, don't come back. Not ever!"

"What?" Cody looked desperate and sick, his world spinning out of control. He glared at his mother.

"Don't say that, Mom. Don't tell him not to come back!"

Mary's eyes never left Mike's face. "Stay out of this, Cody. If he doesn't want us, he can go." She raised her voice again. "Do you hear me, Mike? Don't come back!"

What happened next would be a part of all their lives as long as morning followed night. Cody's father looked once more at the three of them standing on the lawn, then he climbed into the backseat, shut the door, and the cab pulled away.

"Dad!" Cody screamed his name and took off running.

The sound frightened Carl Joseph. He buried his face in his hands and fell onto his knees, rocking forward and calling out, "Mama... Mama... Mama."

Mary went to him. "Shhh. It's okay." She rubbed his back. Why was this happening? And why hadn't there been any warning? She was dizzy with shock, sick to her stomach and barely able to stand as she watched Cody chase after his father's cab.

Never did the cab slow even a little, but all the while Cody kept running. "Dad! Dad, wait!" Five houses down, seven, ten. "Don't go, Dad! Please!"

Each word hit Mary like a Mack truck. When she couldn't take another minute, she screamed after him, "Cody, get back here!"

But he wouldn't come, wouldn't stop running. All the way to the end of the block, with a speed he'd gotten from his father, he ran until the cab was long gone from sight. Then, for ten minutes, he stood there. A dark-haired eight-year-old boy, standing on the corner staring after a cab that wasn't ever coming back.

In some small way, Mary was almost glad Mike was gone.

Sure, a few hours earlier she'd been willing to fight for their marriage. But that was when she thought things were simpler. She could understand his confusion, what with his football career in limbo.

But to be embarrassed by Carl Joseph?

Carl was her son, a part of her. Because of his disability, he'd never be capable of the kind of low, mean-spirited act his father had just committed. No, Carl would always have a kind, simple heart, but Mike would miss that—the same way he'd missed everything about Carl Joseph since the day he was diagnosed.

Even as she stood there, willing Cody to turn around and come home, not quite believing her marriage was over, she felt her resolve building. There was no loving a man who didn't love his own son. If Mike didn't want to be a father to Carl Joseph, she'd love the boy enough for both of them. She would survive, even if she never heard from Mike Gunner again.

She focused on Cody once more, his little-boy shoulders slumped forward as he waited, facing the empty spot where the cab had disappeared. He was crying, no doubt. She could almost see his smudged, tearstained cheeks and the slack-jawed look on his face. Was he feeling the way she felt? Abandoned? Overcome with despair?

A strange thought hit her, and suddenly fear had the upper hand.

Because the thought was something she hadn't considered until that moment. Yes, she would survive, and certainly Carl Joseph would be okay without Mike. But Cody adored his father; he always had. And if the boy's slumped shoulders were any indication, Cody might not bounce back the way she and Carl would.

Rather, he might never be the same again.

Cody's sides hurt from running.

He dug his fingers into his waist and stared down the empty street. "Dad!" The picture filled his mind again. The cab slowing down, stopping for a minute, then making a gradual left turn. "Dad, come back."

A breeze hit him in the face and he realized he was crying.

"Dad!" Cody gasped, grabbing at any air he could suck in. Why did he leave? Where did he go? Dad took trips all the time, but he always came home. Always. What had he said? He wasn't coming back; was that it? His dad's words rumbled around inside him, making his chest tight, filling his heart and soul and lungs with hurt. Every breath was a struggle.

His dad was gone.

He was gone and there was nothing Cody could do about it. *Come back, Dad!* The words stayed stuck in his throat this time, and he stared down. *Stay, feet. Don't move. He'll come back; he will.*

Cody lifted his eyes to the place where the cab had turned. Any second, right? He'd turn around, come back home, tell them all he was sorry for getting so mad, right? Cody waited and waited and waited. And then he remembered the thing his dad had said about Carl Joseph.

I can't be a father to him...

Eight years was plenty old enough for Cody to understand the problem. Carl Joseph was different. He didn't look right or talk right or walk right. He was happy and really good at loving everyone and he almost never got mad, but their dad maybe didn't notice that. That's why, this time, having his dad leave was more serious.

Because he didn't want to be a daddy to Carl Joseph.

Cody stared down the street. *Come back, Dad... turn around.* He waited and watched for a long, long time.

Nothing.

No movement, no sounds of cars turning around and coming back. No yellow cabs. Just the quiet dance of twisty green leaves above him and the hot summer song of unseen crickets. Or something like crickets.

Later his mother would tell him that she cried for him, standing there all that time, waiting for his father to come back. But after a while, Cody wasn't just standing there waiting; he was swept up in a feeling he'd never known until that day.

It started in his feet, almost as if it were oozing up through the cracked bumpy sidewalk. A burning that flooded his veins and pushed higher, past his knees and thighs, into his gut, where it swirled and mixed and grew until it filled his heart and mind, and finally his soul.

Not until it fully consumed him, not until it took up every spare bit of his young body, did he realize what had come over him, into him.

Cody knew what hate was because of Billy Bloom in his second-grade class. Billy was bigger than everyone else. Bigger and meaner. He tripped kindergartners, and stole the ball from the kickball game at recess, and laughed at Cody when he got a wrong answer in math. Cody hated Billy Bloom.

But what he was feeling now, this was something new, something so powerful it burned in his arms and legs and made him feel heavy and slow and trapped. All the other times Cody had used the word hate, he'd been wrong. Because *this*—what he felt for his father—was hatred.



CODY NEVER TOLD anyone, but that morning he felt his heart shrivel up and die, all except the piece that belonged to Carl Joseph. His little brother thought Cody was Superman and Christopher Robin all rolled into one. As the weeks passed, every morning was the same routine. Carl Joseph would scamper down the hall to Cody's room, slip inside, and stand next to the bed.

"Brother..." He would pat Cody's shoulder. "It's a new morning."

Cody would stir and blink his eyes and find Carl Joseph there. "Yep, buddy. A brand-new morning."

"Is Daddy coming home today?"

Cody would grit his teeth and sit up some. "Not today, buddy. I don't think so."

For a minute worry would cast shadows on Carl Joseph's face. But then a grin would fill his round cheeks and he'd make a funny chuckling sound. "That's okay, 'cause know why, brother?"

"Why?"

"'Cause I have you, brother. I always have you."

Cody would hug him around the neck. "That's right, buddy. You always have me."

The two of them were inseparable. Carl Joseph followed him around the house, waiting for him at the front window on school days. He didn't talk as clear as other kids, and he had those puffy bunches of skin under his eyes. But he was the happiest little guy Cody ever saw. He loved with abandon, and after a few months he would walk into Cody's room one morning and didn't ask about when Daddy would come home.

That day Carl Joseph worked his way into the deepest part of Cody's heart. He still wasn't sure exactly what was wrong with Carl Joseph, but whatever it was, Cody had a feeling there wouldn't be many people in his little brother's life. If their dad didn't want Carl Joseph, maybe no one would.

No one but Cody. Whatever else happened, Cody would love Carl Joseph, and maybe that was all he'd ever love. He had no use for his mother; she was a grown-up, the only one with the power to keep Cody's father home. Instead, she'd stood right there on the grass and told him to go. Told him to go and never come back.

The rest of that year, Cody would wait until Carl Joseph was asleep, then he'd creep up to his room without saying good night to his mother. He'd lie on the bed and stare at the wall. Sometimes tears would come, sometimes not. Always he would start at the beginning.

Hearing his dad talk to his mom about leaving, about not wanting to be with Carl Joseph. Then seeing his dad with a suitcase and following him out into the front yard and watching him head for the yellow cab.

"Good-bye, son. Good-bye."

The story would run again and again in his head, playing out on the blank wall beside his bed. Almost always his mother would find him there. Most of the time she didn't ask about why Cody went to bed early or why he was lying on his side staring at the wall or why he never told her good night or what he was feeling about his dad being gone.

But once in a while she would try.

Cody remembered one night the next spring when his mom came up to talk to him. She opened the door and took a loud breath. Then she moved a few steps toward him. "I hate that you hide up here, Cody. You're not the only one hurting."

"Yes, I am!" Cody turned over and sat up. His heart skittered around in his chest. "Carl Joseph doesn't remember Daddy."

"I miss him, too." She sat on the edge of his bed. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her voice was tired. "I love him, Cody. It's not my fault he left."

"It is too your fault!" Cody closed his eyes and remembered his father leaving. When he opened them the anger inside him was bursting to get out. "You told him to go!"

"Cody." His mom touched his foot. Her fingers were shaking. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes you did!" His voice got louder. "You told him to go and never come back."

"Because I was mad. I didn't really want him to go."

But nothing she said that night or any other time was enough to convince Cody. She told his dad to leave, and not only that, she did nothing to make him stay. Maybe if she'd been nicer to him, helped him find another football job. Made him better dinners. Anything to make sure he didn't walk out the door.

Even when it no longer made sense, long after his childhood days blended into middle school, Cody blamed her. Because it was easier to dole out blame than it was to unravel the knot of hatred and sort through the loose ends of a lifetime of bitterness.

By the time Cody was in seventh grade, the football coach approached him.

"You're Mike Gunner's boy, right? Atlanta Falcons back a few years ago?"

Cody bristled, his spine stiff. "Yes, sir."

"Well." The coach gave a few slow nods. "I've watched you out with the other boys." The man hesitated. "You're good, Cody. You play just like your dad. The varsity coach over at the high school wants you to join

em for practice a few times a week. How does that sound?"

Cody made a hurried attempt at trying to sort through his emotions. *Just like my dad?* He swallowed, not sure what to say.

The coach raised his brow, as if maybe he expected a different reaction. "What can I tell 'em, Gunner? You interested?"

"Yes, sir." He coughed and his words got stuck in his throat. Was that why he loved the game, loved the way the ball felt in the crook of his arm, tucked against his ribs, the way his feet flew down the field? Because he was Mike Gunner's boy? The anger that lived and breathed in that dark closet of his heart roared so loud it took his breath away.

If football was his father's legacy, he wanted nothing to do with it.

The coach started walking away. "Okay, then. I'll tell him you'll be there."

"Sir?" Cody's face grew hot. He waited until the coach turned around. "What I mean is, no, sir. I won't go; I'm not interested."

The coach gave him a strange look. Then he laughed. "Of course you're interested, Gunner." He twisted his face. "Football's in your blood."

"No, sir." Cody's mind raced, desperate for an answer. "I'm... I'm going out for band."

"Band?" The word clearly left a bad taste in the coach's mouth. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, sir." Cody tried to look serious. "I... I love band." He hesitated. He would no sooner go out for band than dye his hair pink. Cody felt himself relax; he stood a little taller. "Band's what I live for."

The coach studied him, a frown deepening the lines in his forehead. Then he shrugged and took a step back. "Suit yourself, Gunner. I'll tell 'em you have other plans."

As Cody watched the man leave, a certainty filled his soul. He would never pick up a football again as long as he lived. No matter his feelings for the game, if seeing him with a pigskin reminded people of his father, he wanted none of it.

Later that year he fell in with a group of 4-H kids, guys who needed help with their farming or livestock. Cody was a quick study, and after a few months he could handle a horse as well as the kids who'd been on them for years.

One night just before summer, he and the guys met at the fairgrounds to watch the high school rodeo team practice. They moved close to the fence and Cody breathed it in, the heavy smell of bull hides. Cody knew about bull riding, but that night was the first time he ever saw a cowboy ride. The guy was a junior, a scrawny kid Cody had seen around town. Slow and careful, the cowboy lowered himself onto a jet-black bull, and in a blur the gate flew open and the animal burst into the arena.

Wild and out of control, the bull bucked and jerked and reared his head back. It was all the cowboy could do to hold on, and after six seconds, he slid to one side of the animal's back and fell hard in a heap to the ground.

"No good!" an older cowboy shouted. The man was in his late twenties, maybe. The rodeo coach, no doubt. "You need eight, Ronny. Eight seconds."

The kid picked himself up, dusted off his loose-fitting jeans and pressed his cowboy hat onto his head. His voice held a type of respect Cody admired. "Yes, sir. Eight seconds."

Five bulls stood together in a stock pen. The black one, two brown, one gray- and white-spotted, and one that was broad and yellow with a hump between its shoulders. One after another Ronny and a handful of high school cowboys took on the bulls while their instructor shouted out advice.

"Find the seat, Taylor, find it and keep it!... Move your legs, Ronny.... Kevin, bring your hand up higher over your head! Okay, good."

Cody barely heard any of it.

He was too busy watching the bulls, studying them, hypnotized by their fury. Those eight seconds, while the cowboy was on the bull's back, were the picture of a battle he knew intimately. The war he waged every day against the anger and rage within him. The way the rider struggled to stay on through the violent bucking, looking for the center of a ride that was never even close to controlled. It was the same way he fought to stay on top of the emotions that boiled inside him.

Before he could voice what he was feeling, without saying a word to his buddies, he followed the fence around the arena and walked up to the man still barking orders at the cowboys.

"That's better, Ronny; can you feel it? Keep it centered!"

"Sir?" Cody squared his legs and crossed his arms.

The man gripped the crown of his hat and looked over his shoulder. "Whadya want, kid?"

Cody didn't hesitate. "I want to ride."

"Yeah?" The coach smiled and a sarcastic chuckle sounded deep in his throat. "What are you, eleven?"

"Thirteen." The anger grew a few degrees hotter. He straightened himself. "I'll stay on any bull you've got."

The man leaned into the fence and sized him up. "What grade you in? Seventh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Another year before you can ride for me." He turned toward the action in the arena.

Cody stared at the man's back and clenched his teeth. He didn't need anyone's permission to ride a bull.

It was his own thing; between the bull and him. He continued around the arena to the chutes.

One of the cowboys shot him a look. "Hey, kid, get lost. This is for cowboys only."

"I'm a cowboy." He nodded the brim of his hat toward the coach. "He wants to see what I can do."

The kid frowned, but then his expression eased. He raised one shoulder. "Okay. Take the next one."

He should've been scared, at least. The bulls had no horns, but the animals were massive. One slip beneath those muscled legs, and there wouldn't be any ride to remember. Cody worked the muscles in his jaw. As long as the coach didn't see him in the chutes, he'd be all right.

When it was his turn, he glanced at the coach and felt himself relax. The guy was talking to three riders, his back to the chute. Cody held his breath. He wasn't leaving the arena without getting on a bull.

"Take your ride, little man," one of the bigger cowboys shouted at him. "We're waiting."

Cody bit down hard and steadied himself. Then he did what he'd seen the other cowboys do. He climbed into the chute, one foot on either side of the bull, and fumbled with the rope. His hand had to be wrapped to the bull somehow, right? He flipped the rope around, trying to make a loop.

"Oh, brother. Ain't you ever done this?" The cowboy on the gate leaned over. "Which hand you ridin' with?"

Which hand? Cody gulped and thrust his right hand out.

"That'll do." The cowboy set to work wrapping Cody's hand, palm up, until it was tight against the bull's back. "Slide forward."

Cody did as he was told. That's when he noticed the look in the bull's eyes.

Lifeless, hard eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of whichever mortal had dared climb on his back. Cody stared at the beast. The anger in the animal's expression was rivaled only by his own.

"Ya hear me, cowboy? You ready?"

Cody blinked. What was he doing, sitting on a bull? Was he crazy? Fear tried to say something, but anger kicked it in the shins. *Come on, bull, give it all you got. Your fury's nothing compared to mine.* He nodded. "Ready."

The chute was open.

Stay centered, wasn't that what the coach had told the other riders? *Keep your seat; stay centered.* He focused on the animal's back, and suddenly he wasn't fighting to stay on a bucking bull. He was taking on his father, battling the loneliness and rejection and abandonment, focusing all his rage on the beast.

How many times had thoughts of his dad made him want to punch his hand through a wall or rip a door from its hinges? Running helped! some, but nothing eased the rage in his heart.

Nothing until now.

The buzzer sounded. Cody pulled his hand free and swung his legs over the side of the bull. Something was making its way through his veins, but it took a few seconds to realize what it was.

Relief.

For the first time since his father walked out, his heart didn't feel paralyzed with rage. The reason was obvious: he'd left every bit of emotion on the back of the bull.

Only then did he hear the coach bellowing in his direction. One of the cowboys herded the bull back into the chute, and a hush fell over the arena. Cody turned and stood frozen, facing the man. His buddies had moved closer. They were clustered outside the fence, eyes wide.

"Stay there, kid. Don't move!" Even in the shadowy arena lights, the coach's cheeks were bright red. He stormed up to Cody until their faces were inches apart. His voice fell to a dangerous hiss. "I told you to go home."

“Sorry, sir.” Cody swallowed hard, but he didn’t break eye contact. “I... I had to.”

The man twisted his face into a sneer aimed at Cody. Then, bit by bit, his face unwound and he took a step back. “Where’d you learn to ride like that?”

He couldn’t lie to the man now; not if he wanted to ride again. “That was my first ride, sir.”

“Your first...” The coach narrowed his eyes. “That was your first time on a bull?”

“Yes, sir.” Cody pulled himself a bit straighter. “I’m sorry, sir.”

The man hung his thumbs on his belt buckle. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Cody. Cody Gunner.”

“You going to Jefferson High, Gunner?”

“Yes, sir.” He looked at the ground for a moment. “When I’m old enough.”

“You wanna be a bull rider, is that it?”

A bull rider? Cody hadn’t considered the idea before. But he wanted to climb back on a bull more than he’d ever wanted anything. Cody exhaled, still catching his breath, his eyes on the coach again. The rush from the ride was wearing off. “Yes, sir. I want that.”

The coach hesitated. This was the part where he’d kick Cody out of the arena and tell him he’d never ride for Jefferson’s rodeo team. Not ever. Cody waited, unable to blink under the man’s stare.

But instead of ordering him home or threatening him for his actions, the coach gave a single nod. The hint of a rusty old smile tugged on his lips. “You know something, Cody Gunner? I think you’ll be a pretty good one.”

After that, there was no turning back.

Cody’s birthday was three weeks later, in June. He wanted just one thing—tuition and transportation to a bull-riding school in Colorado.

“Bull riding?” His mother frowned. “Cody, that’s the craziest sport on earth.” She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “You can do anything but that.” She turned back to the dishes she’d been doing. “Play football like your daddy. At least then you’ll go head-to-head with a boy your size. Not a bull.”

Football like his daddy? Cody felt his gaze harden. He had nothing but contempt for his mother. After all this time she still didn’t get it, didn’t understand him. Sure, she was easy on him. She didn’t give him rules the way other boys had rules from their parents. Instead she gave him whatever he wanted, and peppered him with questions. “Cody, how are you?” “Cody, what’re you thinking?” “Cody, what are you feeling?” “Cody, what’s wrong?”

He was sick of her questions, sick of her trying to make up for the fact that he didn’t have a dad. She never hassled him about his attitude or lack of kindness, even when he secretly wished she would.

But if she could suggest football, she didn’t even know him.

Carl Joseph must’ve heard the conversation because he pushed his way between them. He was eight by then, as sweet and simple as he’d been at two. “Cody, brother, c’mere!”

The heat in Cody’s anger cooled. Carl Joseph was his best friend, the only one he could trust. Cody couldn’t count the times he’d wished it were he and not Carl Joseph who’d been born with Down syndrome. Because at least Carl Joseph was happy, too simple to understand even that their father had gone away, let alone the reasons why. Carl Joseph’s eyes were honest and full of light, and his enthusiasm knew no limits. He called Cody “brother,” and Cody called him “buddy.”

Carl Joseph grabbed his hand and pulled. “C’mon, brother, talk to me.”

“Just a minute, buddy.” Cody glared at his mother. “It’s Mom’s turn.”

“No, Cody!” Carl Joseph grinned big and tugged a little harder. His voice was loud, excited.

This time Cody couldn’t resist. He gave his mother a look and let himself be pulled into the next room. When Carl Joseph thought they were alone, his eyes sparkled. “You gonna ride a bull, Cody?”

Cody’s heart swelled at the transparent look in his brother’s eyes. A look of thrill and pride and expectancy. “Yes, buddy. I’m gonna be a bull rider.”

“Remember, brother? We watched bull riding on TV?” He rocked back and forth, nervous, anticipating.

“We sure did, buddy.” Cody put his arm around Carl Joseph’s shoulders and gave him a sideways hug.

Carl Joseph let out a whooping victory cry. He slid from Cody’s grasp, marched his feet up and down and moved in a tight winner’s circle around Cody. His arms punched at invisible targets. “Bull riding! Brother’s gonna be a bull rider!”

As Cody watched Carl Joseph that familiar fierce protection reared up in his heart. Once, a few years after their father left, a kid in his class pointed at Cody and laughed. "His brother's a retard! He lives in my neighborhood."

Never mind that the kids were taking a spelling test. Cody had the guy pinned before he had time to cry for help. It took the teacher and a passing custodian to pull Cody off the boy. It was the last time anyone at Davis Elementary said anything mean about Carl Joseph.

Watching him now, the determination in Cody's heart grew. No one better ever harm Carl Joseph, not ever. His brother stopped, drawing loud, exaggerated breaths. "I'm tuckered out, brother."

Cody smiled. "Yeah, you look like it."

So what if his mother didn't approve? He'd already made up his mind. The fact that Carl Joseph was excited only made him that much more sure.

Cody brushed his knuckles along the top of Carl Joseph's head. "We'll talk later, okay?" He made a face. "Mom's waiting."

"Right." Carl Joseph nodded, and did his best imitation of Cody's grimace. "Mom's waiting."

Cody grinned. What wasn't there to love about Carl Joseph? He turned and found his mother waiting in the kitchen. Her arms were crossed.

"What was that all about?"

"Carl's happy for me." Cody stuck out his chin. "I'm fourteen in a few weeks, Mom. I wanna go to bull-riding school. That's all I want."

Her look said everything her words didn't.

She wanted to be mad, wanted to tell him all the things any mother would tell her son if he came home wanting to be a bull rider. People were killed riding bulls; trampled and maimed and paralyzed. A body could age four decades in as many seconds in a sport that violent and unpredictable. But she must've seen the determination in Cody's eyes, because she blinked.

And that single blink told Cody he'd won.

The arrangements came together quickly, and by the time he arrived home from bull-riding school, he couldn't think of anything but getting a seat on the next bull.

Quickly Cody learned something about bull riders. The very good ones rode because they loved the sport, because they'd loved it since they were old enough to jump on the back of a sheep. For those riders, every go-round was an unequalled adrenaline rush, an addictive high that knew no match.

Cody was nothing like those cowboys.

Through middle school and high school, past his eighteenth birthday when he qualified for his Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association card; through event after event when sheer fury drove him to stay on bulls that couldn't be ridden; through the first two seasons when he first noticed Ali, the first two seasons when people started whispering that maybe there was no better bull rider than the independent Cody Gunner and no better barrel racer than the untouchable Ali Daniels, through all the travel and women and rank rodeo stock, he couldn't get one thought out of his head:

His father walked out of Carl Joseph's life because the kid had Down syndrome, because something was clearly wrong with that son. Cody had heard him say so. But what about the other son, the older son? What about him? The man had left Cody, too, and the thing Cody could never quite figure out was this: What, exactly, was wrong with him?

It was this question that stoked the coals of his anger, even when his past seemed forever behind him. No, Cody didn't ride bulls because he loved the rush. The rush was there, and it was real enough. Cody rode because battling a two-thousand-pound bull for eight seconds was the only way to live with the rage.

And as Cody Gunner moved into the public limelight, as he became the talk of the Pro Rodeo Tour, the invincible, undefeatable cowboy, it was that part he kept a secret. The fact that he didn't ride for the love of the sport; he rode because he had to.

Ali Daniels sat in her trailer, not far from her mother, and stared out the window.

"This is my year." She gripped the arms of the swivel chair, her eyes unblinking.

"Yes." Her mom stood. "I can feel it." She opened a cupboard next to the miniature sink and pulled out a bulky vest. "Here." She handed it over. "Let's go, Ali. It's time."

A slow breath eased across Ali's lips. "Okay." She took the vest, slipped one arm through, then the other, and zipped it. A few more snaps and she was ready. She looked out again and saw a group of bundled-up cowboys making their way across the snow-covered parking lot toward Stadium Arena. They laughed, listening to the shortest one in the group, hanging on to whatever story he was telling. Not far back, three couples followed, headed the same way.

This was Denver in late January, the season opener; festivities at the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo would start early and end late. Ali didn't mind missing the hoopla, as long as she was ready for her ride. The ride was all that counted.

She sat at the edge of her chair and kept her eyes on the people; so many people. Good for them for coming out, for cheering on the deserving professional rodeo riders and wranglers. But Ali didn't need them. She would've competed in an empty arena.

Anything to fly across the dirt, power and grace, an extension of the horse she'd spent years training. Sometimes she wasn't sure which of them loved the ride more, she or the muscled palomino horse she'd raised from birth.

"Ali?" Her mother touched her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Her answer was quick. The walls of her chest ached, tighter than usual. Every breath was difficult, intentional, but what else could she say? How she felt wasn't a part of the equation; it never had been. "I'm fine."

"All right." She hesitated. "I'll get ready."

Familiar thoughts swirled about in Ali's heart.

Her popularity was building, not only because she was winning rodeos. She was a mystery, someone they'd dubbed beautiful and unreachable. She leaned forward and winced; the vest was tighter than usual. Yes, the public, the media, all of them held her up and examined her in the limelight. But there was very little she let them see.

She kept to herself, in her trailer with her mother or in a quiet corner of the locker room just long enough to change into her riding clothes. Friendships would be nice, but the less time she spent in the arena the better. She arrived in the tunnel minutes before each ride, and after the event she gathered her things and gave her horse a quick cooldown. Then she changed and headed back outside. The other barrel racers thought her distant, haughty, too good for them.

That wasn't it, but she couldn't explain herself. Not without giving away her secret, not without solving the mystery.

Her routine, her last-minute entry and quick exit from the arena, meant no time for cowboys, either. Just about all the single rodeo men and a few of the married ones had tried to hit on her in the past two years. Once in a while she would catch a smile or a glance from a cowboy who seemed nice enough. But there was no point, nothing she could offer in return.

Not when she was singly focused on two goals: staying healthy and being the best barrel racer in the world.

But the thing that really set her apart was something no one on the tour would ever know about. At least not while she was still competing. People wouldn't understand; they'd ask questions and make pronouncements about the risks and dangers. Before long the story would be out, and everyone would stop seeing her as the most promising barrel racer in rodeo.

Instead, they'd see her for her battles.

That would never happen; Ali was determined. Pro Rodeo would never know about her battles, her secret. They would never find out that she did something no other barrel racer did:

She held her breath when she rode.

From the tunnel around each of the three barrels, and back, she didn't draw a bit of air. The hooves of her horse would keep time with her heartbeat as the seconds played out, one after another. By the time she hit the tunnel again, she was desperate for air, her lungs screaming for relief.

Small wonder that she regularly clocked in at less than eighteen seconds. Whether she was riding at the arena back home or racing for the national championship, every bit of her strength—even the energy it took to breathe—was focused on the ride. The fact that Ali held her breath when she raced was something only her parents knew about. Given the circumstances, they agreed that not breathing during the ride was her best chance of remaining a competitor.

It would be their secret.

So after two full years on the tour, Ali Daniels remained a curiosity, a blue-eyed rider with a thick ponytail of pale blonde hair, black hat and jeans, blazing across the arena on a horse as fair as she was. Reporters would ask her questions after a win, but her answers were never more than a few words. The details of her life went unknown.

The way they would stay.



ALI DREWA slow breath and adjusted the vest. It was never comfortable; especially just before a ride, when all she wanted was to break free, run outside, saddle up Ace, and ride like the wind around the outside of the arena.

She bit her lower lip. Patience. There was no riding without patience.

The truth was, she shouldn't have been here at all—not her, and not Ace. Ace was a quarter horse so small at birth his owner was willing to give him away. Only Ali had seen the horse's potential, rearing him and coaxing him and hand-feeding him until he was as big and strong as any horse on the tour.

That alone was shocking, because Ali's parents never wanted anything to do with horses.

Ali and her younger sister, Anna, grew up on a cattle ranch in Colorado, where her father made the rounds on an ATV quad-runner. Horses were off-limits, too much dander and dust, too many allergens, too great the chance that Ali and Anna might get sick. Because of their allergies, the sisters took their lessons at home in rooms cleaned by air purifiers. They were taught to read and sew and play the piano. Outdoor time was kept to a minimum.

But in the evening, when their parents were busy, Ali and Anna sat by the bedroom window and dreamed of another life. Ali remembered one time more clearly than the others.

"You know what I wanna do?" Anna's eyes sparkled that evening. "I wanna race through the forever hay fields and play hide-and-seek out by the tallest pine trees, and jump on that palomino horse next door." Anna was eight that year; Ali nine. The idea seemed wild and outrageous and terribly exciting. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"Yes." Ali squinted at the world beyond their sterile confines. "One day we will, okay, Anna? One day."

But the chance never came.

One afternoon when Anna was ten, she caught a cold. Something must've blown into the house from the garden, their mother always guessed. The cold became bronchitis, quick and fast. An asthma attack sent her to the hospital, and by the next day she had a respiratory infection. Within forty-eight hours her fever raged out of control. Pneumonia set in and because of her situation, no doctor or antibiotic could do a thing to help her. All their attempts at safety, all the years spent watching life through a window, had done nothing to save Anna. Three days later she was gone.

Anna's death changed everything for Ali, and she made up her mind. She would not watch life from a window; she would live it to the fullest, doing everything Anna had dreamed of doing.

The memory dissolved and Ali adjusted her vest again. She tried to draw a deep breath, but it wouldn't come; not fully.

She still had a few hours before her ride, so remembering helped pass the time. The season opener always stirred up the past, bringing reminders of how fortunate she was, how hard she'd fought against the odds and how easily this season-or any season—could be her last.

The pretty horse next door had a foal, and the foal became Ali's closest friend. He was the color of caramel custard with a mane the same pale blonde as Ali's long hair. She named him Ace, and against the odds, against the doctor's warnings, she spent every spare moment with him and grew stronger for it. With the neighbor's help, she broke him and trained him and learned to fly across the fields behind her parents' home.

Eventually she discovered barrel racing, and her father built an arena and a barn, with a custom air-filtration system to reduce the allergens from damp hay and horse dander. Ali remembered once when her aunt and uncle asked how her parents could be a willing party to something that might shorten their daughter's life.

Ali never forgot her father's answer. "Riding horses *is* Ali's life," he told them. "It's that simple."

So it was.

On Ace she not only had a purpose—to round the barrels faster than anyone had before—but she felt vibrant, all of life bursting within her. And that feeling defied any sense of reason, because doctors and medicine and statistics said she should be dying.

The mystery was this: Ali Daniels had cystic fibrosis.

Cystic fibrosis—with all its terrible limitations and its lifetime sentence of having her back pounded two hours each day so she could cough up the thick secretions that would otherwise choke her. CF, the doctors called it, the same condition Anna had been born with. The disease in which every cold could go into pneumonia; and every bout of pneumonia could mean death.

Ali's parents never told her the prognosis for people with cystic fibrosis. She found it for herself—on the Internet. Patients with CF usually died as young adults, and though the life expectancy had risen, the outcome was certain.

One day, not too far off, the disease would kill her.

Ali adjusted her position again. The vest was tight against her ribs, tight and uncomfortable. It wasn't for protection, the way the bull riders' vests were, though hers was customized to look like theirs. Rather, it was a compression vest. Powered by electricity, the vest had a series of air chambers, which rhythmically compressed Ali's lungs. The vest did mechanically what used to be done only by Ali's parents pounding on her chest and back.

One way or another, her lungs had to be cleared.

She leaned forward and let the vest work its magic. Ten more minutes and she'd be done. A series of coughs came over her, productive coughs. The type that kept her healthy. When she was finished, she closed her eyes and remembered again.

Her first rodeo came before her fourteenth birthday, the first time she and Ace tore around the barrels for a winning time. Three years later she hit the Pro Rodeo Tour, and she'd been hard to beat ever since.

Same as Cody Gunner.

The two of them were alike, both quiet, distant. Mysterious.

Ali was no longer amazed at how the crowd responded to Cody, how whole sections of women in the stands would wave their arms and chant his name when Cody received another saddle or a buckle. The sight of a six-foot-two bull rider with short dark hair, unrelenting blue eyes, and a confidence bigger than the arena left them collectively breathless.

Ali wasn't blind; the attraction was there for her, too. But that was as far as it went. As far as it would ever go. She'd shared the winner's circle with Cody too many times to count, and still they'd never said more than a polite hello to each other. Other cowboys would tip their hats or smile in her direction. Several made attempts at conversation.

Only Cody Gunner never tried, and that suited Ali fine. Cody was an island, a loner—just like her. He didn't flirt with the barrel racers or grin at the cowgirls who hung out near the stock pens; he didn't tend to the throng of female fans who waited for him after every rodeo.

The longer she rode the tour with him, the more Ali thought she understood him. The fact that he kept his distance didn't mean he was unkind, any more than she was unkind for keeping hers. On occasion, when their eyes met, Ali thought she saw a glimpse of something familiar in Cody's soul. A respect, maybe. A sameness. Whatever drove Cody Gunner to ride bulls for a living, Ali guessed it wasn't far off from what drove her. A passion born of something intensely private.

So while she didn't get weak at the knees in his presence, she quietly admired his independence, the way he didn't need people or trappings or success, but just the bull. Just the ride. He had placed second last year, just as she had.

This year—for one more season at least—they'd share the tour and the limelight with a single goal: a national championship. There was talk that Cody then might leave the tour, join Tuff Hedeman's upstart Professional Bull Riders circuit where the stock was more rank, the purses potentially bigger. If Cody was going to leave, this could be the last year they'd tour together.

Not that it mattered. That cold January day, the beginning of her third season in the PRCA, Ali Daniels had more important details to mull over than whether this was Cody's last season with the Pro Rodeo Tour. This was her year, the year she would stay healthy and strong and break record after record on her quest for the championship.

Ali and Ace, making history.

Her heart had room for nothing else.

The season was three weeks old, and Cody Gunner was riding better than ever. The tour was in San Antonio, and his draw that night was a good one—a bull named Monster Mash, ridden just once in twenty-two attempts. A rider who could stay the course was guaranteed a score in the high eighties. Make it pretty and anything was possible.

Cody didn't worry about the judges. Scores didn't matter nearly as much as the eight seconds. If he got bucked off, Cody's anger would swell and grow, desperate for release. But if he stayed on for eight, he could beat the demons that battled him—if just for the night. There was the practical side, too. Winning meant enough money to keep playing the game.

Cody hung his rope in his locker, shoved his gear bag inside, and headed down the tunnel. Like most of the winter events, this one was at an indoor arena—the Joe and Harry Freeman Coliseum. It was his fifth season in the PRCA, so Cody knew his way around most of the venues. He tucked his shirt in as he walked, making sure the buttons lined up with his belt buckle.

Before he could stretch, before he could focus on the ride, he needed to know where he was in the lineup. He came into the clearing and turned right toward the information table, the place where the judges sat in a row, their paperwork spread out in front of them.

That's when something caught his attention.

A few feet away, leaning against the wall, was a fellow bull rider, a Brazilian who had taken first place from him three times the year before. Next to the cowboy was an older man with the same eyes, same cheekbones. The rider's father, Cody figured. He'd seen the two of them together before, in a handful of cities.

Cody watched them, watched the way the older man put his hand on the bull rider's shoulder, whispering something that made the cowboy smile. Probably some bit of encouragement or advice, something only a father could bring his son in the hour before a bull ride.

That was the way his own father had been with him before he walked out, wasn't it? Kind and compassionate, there with words of encouragement when Cody was up at bat in Little League or working on a school project?

Cody clenched his fists and turned from the scene. A young woman at the information table smiled at him. "Cody Gunner, what can I do for you?"

Images of the Brazilian cowboy and his father burned in his mind. Cody focused on the woman. "Where am I in the order?"

The woman checked a list, grabbed a scrap of paper, and scribbled something. "Here." She handed it to him. "Good luck tonight."

Cody took the slip, nodded at her, and headed back down the tunnel. Halfway to the locker room he opened the paper. The woman had written that he rode second to last that night. At the bottom she'd scribbled her phone number.

He ripped the paper in half and went to his locker. It was time to stretch, even if his ride wasn't until the end. But he couldn't focus yet, couldn't let go of the picture in his head, the one of the rider and his dad.

What would it be like to ride bulls with his dad around, to get a dose of wisdom and confidence from his father before every ride? Cody opened his locker, pulled out his worn deerskin riding glove, and slammed the door shut. He dropped to the bench, hung his head, and closed his eyes.

Of course the thought would haunt him today. There was no way around it, not after his mother's call that morning. She knew better than to call him the day of a ride, but she did it anyway. The news had made Cody sick to his stomach, unable to force down more than a piece of toast and an apple all day. Her call played in his mind again.

"He found us." Her voice was nervous, mixed with fresh hope.

"Who?" Cody had still been in bed, the hotel sheets a mess from the night before. He blinked back a hard night's sleep and tried to focus. He was alone, though he hadn't been a few hours earlier. What was his mother talking about, someone finding them? Had Carl Joseph wandered off? "Tell me later; I'm tired."