

A loud knock rattled the door on his brand-new travel trailer. Clayton yanked it open, cocked his head and stared at a scruffy, blonde-haired kid. The office manager used the young'un to run errands and other menial chores.

The kid held up a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, "There's a woman on the phone asking for you."

Clayton spat a dark stream of tobacco juice that splattered on the ground a few feet away from the kid's ragged cowboy boot. The last call he received during the bull riding season was two years ago. An aunt called to tell him his old man had passed away. Hell, the family was too thinned out for that kind of call.

"All right, run along. I'll be right behind ya."

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Clayton's shoulder bumped the doorjamb as he stepped into the office. His attention focused on a fellow bull rider straddling the back of a grey Brahman bull inside the chute. The gate was about to fly open at any moment.

He snatched the phone off the counter and fumbled with it before getting the handset to his ear. "Hello."

"Hello. Clayton?"

"Yes. Are you a fan?" His turn to ride was approaching, and he tapped a boot against the counter.

"No. I'm Eloise from Ryebeck, Kansas." She fought her raspy voice for clarity.

"Oh. What's this about?"

The rider flew off the bull's back a few seconds after barreling out of the chute. Clayton

wincing when the man's lanky body slammed against the ground, flat on his side. Carlsbad, not the rider's name, but where the cowboy hailed from. The eight second horn blared as he struggled to gain his feet.

"There's no easy way to say this." She muffled a cough, "you're the father of my son."

The rodeo became quiet, like it was on T.V. "You're mistaken. I haven't been in Kansas since..."

"He's three. I'd given up on finding you, but then you showed up on T.V.—riding bulls. You didn't," her vocals weakened, "seem like the type to drop everything for a lonesome girl in Kansas."

Another rider clambered up onto the platform above the chutes. He lowered himself into position on top of a tan bull named Kistler's Whistler.

"Three? A son—in Kansas?"

"His name is Jessie."

"I worked on the wheat harvest crews back then. We went through Kansas." For a second endless fields of golden wheat stretched out in all directions. "It could've been any one of the men."

"Do you still have that huge belt buckle? It had your name on it with two roses and a colt revolver."

"I lost that one a couple years ago in Cheyenne, two colt forty-fives and a single rose."

A southern drawl crackled out of the loud speaker. "Yowza, what a fine ride by Howie Lawrence, no doubt it's going to post well. Anything over eighty-seven will put him in the top five don't you think Terry?"

“Yes sir, it sure will.”

She cleared her throat. “Oh. Well, the buckle is about all I remember besides your handsome face, graveled voice and a cheap motel room. I’ve never been much of a drinker.”

“Jesus, you’re the girl—but those were drunken dreams.”

“No. You’ve got a beautiful son down here in Ryebeck.”

He lifted his hat off his head and reseated it to be straighter. “What do want from me?”

The announcers’ voices returned to normal. “Sam, there’s only one cowboy out there who can run away with this and head off to the semifinals.”

“You got that right Terry and he’s up right after this next fine rider from Havilland, Texas.”

A child began wailing in the background. “I’m sick. The doctors’ say it’s curable, but I’m telling you about your son in case they’re wrong.”

His face contorted. “Sick?”

“Cancer, but...”

“Look, I gotta go. My bull is being lead up to the gates.” He took a step out of the doorway, the phone cord kept him from going any farther.

“I—we don’t expect anything. I wanted to make sure you knew about Jessie in case...”

“These are the quarterfinals. I’ll be disqualified if I miss my ride.”

Clayton’s name echoed out of the speakers and the crowd’s roar made it impossible to hear anything she said except the word please.

He stepped back inside the office. “What?”

“My phone number and address—write them down on something you won’t throw away.”

“Okay, okay.”

#

He went to visit them, one time, in between riding and working. The four-year-old boy was his spitting image and denying the child would’ve made him a fool. Eloise’s face was gaunt and her eyes haggard. He’d have guessed she was twenty years older than her actual age. Her feeble grandmother and sister with the distant stare of a drug addled brain stood in the cramped kitchen gaping at him.

Eloise led him out the back door which had come off its bottom hinge a long time ago. The door had created a groove in the cement floor and Clayton paused for a moment. He could fix the damn thing in ten minutes, but Eloise motioned for him to follow her. They passed through a backyard cluttered with junk and choked by weeds. She stopped and turned to him after they’d walked a hundred yards into an open field of short, green wheat.

“They talk about remission, but I feel worse than before.” Her voice became croakier with each word.

He smiled. “You’re recovering.”

“I’m begging you to take Jessie when I die.” She stared into his eyes. “Momma’s too old and sis does meth or God knows what.”

“I’m on the road half the year chasing the circuit.” He snatched the large Stetson off of his head and waved it in a circular motion. “That ain’t no place for a child—and the ranches have strict rules against children in the bunkhouses, wives too.”

“Ryebeck will be no better for him when I’m gone.” She fidgeted with the strings of her apron.

“I don’t know the first thing about kids.”

She slanted a smile and shrugged. “You figure it out as you go.”

He searched her face. “There’s got to be a…”

“If I could’ve found a better place for him I’d have left you alone.”

“You’re in remission. The cancer’s gone.” He turned away and stared at Ryebeck lying in the distance. The same small pit stop from his harvesting days should’ve shriveled up and died out. What in the hell was keeping it alive?

“Banking on my survival is a fool’s dream.”

He snapped his head back. “I can’t…”

“I’m sending him to you when the time comes.” She sighed and let the apron strings fall, “If you turn away your own son, then that’s how it’ll have to play out.”

#

Two years after his visit, the boy and a letter showed up in Galveston. The sister and grandmother were more ragtag, more derelict. Calving season had forced them to bring Jessie to him. They left within an hour because the sister was violating parole. Their rattling truck crawled up the long lane of a large Texas ranch. It spewed black exhaust into dust churned up from the bald tires as it rattled away. Christ, would the damn thing make it back to Kansas?

After the truck travelled out of view he scanned her letter. Jessie continued to play with dirt clods inside a small corral next to the bunkhouse.

Clayton,

He's a little boy and he needs someone to look after him. I reckon hard love is better than none at all. I'm hoping you can do right by him, but I have my misgivings about this arrangement. Even so, you're his best chance.

1. He eats like a lumberjack and about as often as a slop hog.
2. School will be difficult with your lifestyle, but he needs to learn.
3. He's all boy. He likes cars, action figures, sticks, and anything that'll get him grubby or in trouble.
4. He questions everything, which will be trying for you, but it's a phase as most things are with children.

Well, this list could go on for pages upon pages and you've skimmed it at most. I assume there're many women in your life. A consistent female influence would help ensure he grows up to be less gruff than his father. That's harsh, but I don't care because he's such a loving boy. My mind runs wild about what he'll be like after spending time with you, yet there's nothing that can be done.

Please tell him about me when the time is right. You don't know anything about me, but all he needs to know is, I wish I could've had a whole life time with him. Both of you should know I've loved him since the day I found out about our little mistake and I'll never stop loving him. I'll be watching over him from Heaven and praying for both of you.

My body will be placed next to my father's plot in Ryebeck's smaller cemetery. There's a map on the back of this letter so you can show our son where his mother is laid to rest. I hope you bring him by at some point so I'm more than a long forgotten memory.

Sincerely,

Eloise Anita Grangler

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They were in Ogden for the circuit finals. Whether he won or not, the last ride of his career was minutes away. Eloise's letter, wedged into the lower corner of his mirror, caught his eye. The whitish paper had turned yellow. Tattered edges and dark stains made her handwritten words seem older than a decade. A partial view of the map to her gravesite furrowed his brow and deepened his scowl.

His image, distorted by a large crack angling across the mirror revealed too much. An old man's face on a middle-aged body vying for a top spot in a young man's sport. Irritation and a ticking clock pushed him out of the tiny bathroom.

In between rides he and Jessie had another rough conversation. The young hothead stormed out of the old travel trailer vowing he'd never come back. The door banged shut with a loud metallic thwack. The same thunderclap when he slammed his own father's door rang out in Clayton's ears. He joined the wheat harvest crews the following morning. What in the hell would Jessie do?

He tossed items into an old gear bag and the past forced itself into his mind. The hard, hot days of harvesting and back breaking work on different ranches had led to fame. Riding bulls started from a drunken bet during his first ranch hand job. He'd held on longer than any of the other roughs when they rode ole Dempsey, a retired pro-circuit bull used for training. Things took off and bull riding became his main way of life. Then fast living followed. A blur of women's faces, endless booze and squandered prize money made his teeth clench tighter together.

His past seemed like someone else's memories, someone else's heartache. All of the

people and places were immersed in vapid daydreams. In his flashback the goddamned choices stood out more than anything else. The choices he'd made were open sores always festering and eating away at his future.

Jessie would go to Delia; the toughest rodeo clown Clayton had ever met. Somewhere along the way she'd also become the main woman in his life. When it came to broken bones and drunk cowboys her grittiness had few equals. In the fragmented connection between them her toughness remained steadfast with fleeting moments of weakness.

With Jessie she'd been soft and caring from the beginning. She'd saved Clayton's ass in the arena dozens of times. How many times had she salvaged the delicate relationship between him and his son?

She might try to repair the damage. Hell, maybe this time she'd push the boy away. After their last fight she'd said, "I've had enough of this father and son bullshit." She talked like that each time they fought, but she sounded more convincing.

He stepped out of his trailer with the gear bag in his hand. Rosin, bull rope, and gloves stuffed in with a flashy western shirt, spurs, and extra vest weighed heavier than normal. He hobbled past rows of trailers, the limp from his training days worsening every year from hard living. The voices and roar of a Sunday crowd loudened with each painful step.

His right shoulder still throbbed from the first two rides and soft, powdery dirt worked through holes in the bottoms of his boots. Halfway to the arena he paused. He took a deep breath and packed a large pinch of Copenhagen into his lower lip. After he situated the snuff, he moved on toward the excitement.

The loud speakers hailed out John Jared's score of eighty-six point two, five. An announcer continued, "That young man from Texarkana can ride with the best of 'em. That puts



him in third place. Kenny Jenkins has the lead with his second round score of eighty-eight point seven. The other riders are gonna' have a hard time catching him. We haven't seen a number above ninety in quite some time eh Jim?"

"Oh, it's been a while Cal."

Clayton's mind cleared and tried to focus on the next twenty minutes. When was the last time one of his rides scored above eighty-eight? Holding on the full eight seconds for much of the season had proved difficult and lucky until tonight. He'd ridden well enough in the first two rounds to have a slim chance for one last taste of glory.

His draw could've been worse, but no one considered Jackknife a great bull for scoring. He'd already taken on the third toughest brawler in the entire circuit. An eight second ride in the first round where he'd held on rather than rode. Vertigo tossed him off like an annoying cattle egret right as the horn blew. The pain in his shoulder panged from recollection of slamming into the fence after ejection.

He tossed his bag onto the ground at the back of the gates. As soon as he glanced up the chute man gave him the two-minute signal. His bull rope snaked out of the bag and he thrust it up into a sea of hands. He wasted no time trying to figure out who had grabbed the most important piece of his gear.

He bent down to deal with the rest of his stuff. Everything went into place with the savviness of a well-seasoned bull riding veteran. He clambered up the fence and onto the chute platform. His pain vanished, exhilaration a powerful analgesic. He rosined his gloved hand for the final time and dropped the canister down by his bag.

The world drowned out as he assumed the position on top of Jackknife. His tongue swept the snuff out of his lower lip. Then he spat the big wad of wetted grit over the gate and waited.

He locked eyes with one of the chute men, whose calm demeanor helped ease his tension. The commentators' voices blared out of the speakers and he took in a deep breath.

The pent up power of Jackknife flowed out from the massive beast's flanks and into his legs. In a few seconds there'd be an explosion of adrenaline and hostility from the bull. He crushed his own emotional turmoil into a ball of hardened steel in the pit of his stomach.

The chute man nodded his head to signal the horn would sound at any moment. Clayton tightened his grip on the bull rope. He'd twisted the line around his right hand in a perfected amount of wraps and a sense of security surged within him. His left hand rose into the air on its own volition. The horn warbled and the gate swung open. Jackknife became the frenzied bucking beast his selective breeding had created.

Clayton tuned into the bull's rhythm as if the erratic movements were the notes to a song he'd heard a thousand times. The bull raged underneath of him, but the beast's erratic movement seemed tamer than a pony at a petting zoo. His ride became flawless, the best one of his entire career. When the eighth second horn warbled an imaginary voice whispered, "good ride cowboy".

He tried to get off of Jackknife's back, but his glove and bull rope had bound up. The tangle of leather and hemp held him to the side of the wild bucking brute. It'd happened numerous times before and the disastrous outcomes flitted through his alarm. He tried to control the panic as he'd learned to do, but his helplessness retaliated.

Jackknife continued its spinning rampage and he dangled off the bull's side, an unwanted appendage. His sore shoulder popped when it tore from the socket. He could no longer keep himself away from the hard muscular side. After a few jolting hops the back of Jackknife's head slammed into his face. The impact stunned him, but he remained semiconscious. His flopping and flailing went on for minutes until the bull rope released. Clayton crumpled to the ground.

Things were happening around him, but they were slow and fuzzy like waking up from a two-day bender. The hooves of a one-ton bull churned up the dirt inches from his head as it bucked and twirled. Dazed and unable to move all he could do was lay there hoping the bull's hooves kept missing him. Then the shadowed figure of a rodeo clown came into view. Jackknife's monstrous form moved further away and Clayton's body went limp.

Clayton hoarsened a whisper. "Delia?"

"No Dad, it's me." Jessie's face, painted sad clown, stared down at him. "Are you okay?"

"Where's the bull?"

Jessie glanced over his shoulder, "Relax, we've got him."

"Where's the fucking..."

The long horn of Jackknife gored Jessie in the middle of his back. A quick powerful twist of the bull's head flung him up in the air. He landed with a thud and grunt in the musky dirt a few feet away from Clayton. Blood began to saturate the colorful shirt and the crimson wetness blended in with the red stars of his costume. The damp spot continued to grow larger and larger as the seconds ticked away.

The crowded arena had gone silent. Raucous fans sat in their seats rigid and muted out of respect to the injured men. Jessie was in bad shape and Clayton tried to get up to help him. He was still too dazed and unable to move more than his head. The bright lights shining down upon them created halos and distortion. For a moment the young boy he'd met in Ryebeck lay beside him in the black dirt bleeding and dying.

"Can you move?" Clayton inched his arm closer to the boy.

Jessie gasped and groaned. "I can't breathe."

“Be tough, help’s coming.”

“unhhh.”

“Jessie?”

The rush of people cut off more words. Two cowboys lifted Clayton to his feet and the crowd erupted. A score of ninety point five zero echoed through the din. One hand rose into the air and he soaked in the adulation from the deafening rumble. Roses, cowboy hats, baseball caps and other debris landed at his feet. His eyes followed Jessie being hauled off in a stretcher, but he didn’t move. The midst of victory held him fast like a hogtied calf.

The announcers’ voices called out through the starry night. “What a spectacular finish. His final ride in a long rocky career and he takes the title. Ya’ gotta’ feel pretty bad that he and one of our heroic clowns were torn up. They’re telling us it’s a nasty injury, but the clown’s got a good chance of pulling through. Jim, do you even know that guy?”

“No Cal, can’t say I do. If he keeps protecting our hard riding ‘boys like that, then he’ll either have one heck of a career or a darn short one.”

“You ain’t kidding. Okay folks let’s hear another round of applause for our big winner Clayton Donbrooke.”