

# NEVER BURN YOUR MOVING BOXES

A True Tale of a Real-Life Cowboy Wife



JOLYN YOUNG

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## CHAPTER 1 \* **More Than a Conversationalist**

**T**he wind blew down from the mountains in an icy blast. I tucked my silk wild rag into the top of my down jacket and buckled my chaps around my waist. We had a photoshoot to do regardless of the frigid air and spitting snow. A few feet away, Dano and Jim zipped their heavy coats and pulled on cotton gloves.

“Just think, somewhere out there, thousands of people are water skiing and basking in the sun,” said Jim. Beads of hail stuck to his handlebar mustache. The tapered ends flailed wildly in the wind, alternating between hitting him in the eyes and darting up his nostrils with the changing gusts.

“Yeah, those people definitely don’t live in North Fork,” Dano replied.

Taylor and I giggled and walked to the back of the horse trailer to retrieve our mounts for the day. Come spring snowstorm or sunny skies, I couldn’t think of a single way I’d rather spend Memorial Day weekend. Or any other day, for that matter. Ever since I was twelve, all I’d wanted to be was a full-time cowboy. And now here I was at age twenty-four, drawing ranch wages and riding along

with two guys who had never done anything besides ride and rope for a living. They'd brought each of us a horse to ride, since Tayler was from out-of-state and I didn't own one.

I had a sorrel mare of Dano's named Dirty Girl. I bridled her, tightened my cinch, and hitched up my chaps to step on. Jim and Dano readied their own mounts while Tayler threw her reins over one arm and snapped pictures left and right. The assignment was to document Dano for a magazine article, but she pointed the lens at all of us equally. Photos were her artistic medium of choice; words were mine.

We rode down the gravel road to a scenic pond. Dano loped circles on his palomino colt near the water while Tayler took pictures. Jim sat off to the side, turning his horse in small circles to improve his mount's lateral flexion. I waited on Dirty Girl and watched it all.

The country was huge. We were in a Bureau of Land Management allotment that encompassed hundreds of square miles of towering mountains, ice-cold creeks, sagebrush flats, falling-down homesteads, dirt roads, wire fences, antelope, elk, cougars, and domestic livestock. There was a boundary line somewhere, but its presence didn't alter the vastness. On the other side of this allotment was another allotment, and another, all across northern Nevada. They joined together to form an enormous swath of wildlife habitat and ranch country that was occasionally interrupted by a ranch headquarters or a small town consisting of little more than a gas station and a bar. There was always a bar. A man didn't want to risk getting too thirsty this far out on the desert.

When Dano's yellow horse was loped down and Tayler was satisfied with her first set of pictures, we rode on to find another location. Dano's dogs jumped a bunch of yearling steers within a few minutes. We all stepped off to tighten our cinches before we took our ropes down and built a loop.

Taylor hung back with her camera to her eye while Dano ran up and roped a steer around the neck. Jim stopped his horse with his rope in his hand, a loop built and ready to swing.

“Go ahead, get in there and take the first shot,” he told me.

I kicked Dirty Girl up to heel the steer. I swung my rope with the tip of my loop pointed down over the steer’s hip, followed a few strides until I felt confident of my shot, threw my loop, and missed. I reined in my horse to coil my rope and rebuild a loop, just in case Jim missed his shot. He rode up swinging with authority and picked up two feet on the first try.

I wasn’t sure if I should dismount and work the ground like the person who misses usually does when doctoring cattle outside. I hung back with my rope in my hand and looked from Dano to Jim to pick up a hint. I wanted to stay out of Taylor’s pictures for magazine purposes, but I dang sure didn’t want to be accused of shirking my duties.

Dano turned his horse to face his partner and stepped off when Jim’s rope came tight. He tied the rope to his saddle horn and walked to the steer’s head to set his own rope. His yellow colt perked his ears forward and leaned his weight back, holding the rope tight so the steer couldn’t get up. This was how the pair of cowboys and their equine partners worked all day, every day.

Taylor furiously snapped pictures from various angles. As a joke, the guys drew a smiley face on the steer’s side with a fat chalk stick before turning it loose. Ordinarily, they would mark the animal on the back or forehead with a line to indicate it had been doctored, but this time, they were roping solely for photographic purposes.

Halfway through the day we trailered to a new location. Jim and Dano taught us how to tie our horses in the trailer like real cowboys, wrapping the lead rope around the closest vertical bar once, then running it back and securing it with two half hitches tied to a different bar. There were no slip knots and daisy chains

on real working ranches. Dano and Jim were everything I aspired to be—minus the mustaches and Copenhagen rings in their shirt pockets.

I'd wanted to work as a full-time cowboy since I was in sixth grade. When I trained backyard horses during summer breaks from college, I warmed up my favorites by trotting down the bank of the irrigation canal behind my dad's house as the sun came up. I was in a rural subdivision in northern California, but I pretended I was trotting to work on the range. Two years out of college, I got a job on a ranch in Nevada.

I loved riding and roping for a living, but, like most jobs you love so much you'd do them for free, it didn't quite pay the bills. I'd started picking up freelance writing assignments here and there—as long as they were close by, I didn't have to travel far and could keep expenses down. That's how I wound up writing a story, to be accompanied by Tayler's photos, about Dano, aka Dan Lock, and his unique summer job. He lived in a wall tent with fellow cowboy Jim Young from May to September each year, taking care of yearling cattle for Mitch Goicoechea.

I was glad for an excuse to hang out with these guys, ride good ranch horses, and ask dozens of questions. I still couldn't quite believe I was really out there, living my twelve-year-old self's dream. I wrote the story, filed it with my editor, and didn't think too much about either Dano or Jim again.



I sat in the living room of the single-wide trailer I shared with my coworker and friend, Tilly. It was late afternoon, and we were done with work for the day. The couch was small and ancient. Corded brown upholstery hid the worst of its stains. (Sometimes, it's better to just not know.) A multitude of fly specks were splattered across the low ceiling. They were brown on white and there was no hiding those spots. I'd discovered it was best to slay as many as I could with a plastic swatter first thing in the morning, when they were too cold and sluggish to move quickly.

But at least the trailer was warmer than the cold spring air outside. And I only needed to clean up and change my clothes before I headed to Elko.

I was headed for the door when the phone on the end table rang.

"Hi, is this Jolyn?" a male voice asked when I picked up the receiver.

"Yes," I answered cautiously. Usually only my roommate's friends and family called on the landline. Was this a telemarketer? A bill collector? I didn't owe anybody and wasn't in the mood to switch my auto insurance, so it would probably be a short call.

"This is Jim Young," the voice said.

I knew right then that he would make small talk for a few minutes and then ask me for a date, which he did.

"Sorry," I said. "I can't go. I'm headin' to town this afternoon to order a saddle."

Ordering a custom saddle is a big deal. Cowboys often spend more time designing a saddle than they do choosing a spouse, and rightfully so. The average American marriage dissolves after about eight years. A well-made saddle can easily last for decades.

After my polite refusal, Jim countered with an offer of dinner the following Saturday.

"Sure," I said. "That would work."

I didn't have high hopes the date would lead to anything. Jim looked about twenty years older than me. But I operated under the basic dating principle that a man who asked a woman out on a proper date deserved at least one yes, no matter how unlikely the prospect of a second date seemed.



The sound of a diesel engine coming up the driveway to Reed Station, the name of the division of the ranch where I lived, reached my ears before the truck came into view. It was seven o'clock, and I was dressed and ready for Jim to pick me up. He stopped in front of the single-wide and turned off the engine. The sight of his face through the driver's side window shocked me.

He'd shaved off the huge mustache and looked his actual age (which I later found out was thirty). A crisply shaped straw hat replaced his sweat-stained felt one, and he wore boots as a matter of course. A long-sleeve button-down



shirt was neatly tucked into his blue jeans. Both were heavily starched and pressed. A trophy belt buckle lay flat against his stomach.

I blushed hard and quickly turned back down the hallway. I fanned my face with my hand, stirring the artificially sweet smell of hair gel through the air. I breathed deeply and hoped the redness would leave my cheeks by the time Jim knocked on the front door. In my outfit—a fitted purple t-shirt and blue jeans—I suddenly felt a bit underdressed. I was glad I'd taken two minutes to swipe on some mascara before he arrived. At least my jeans were skintight.

"Hi," Jim said when I opened the door. "You look nice."

"Thank you," I replied. "You, too."

At least I didn't stutter or say, "Ditto." Now I just had to make it down the steps without tripping.

Jim walked me to the passenger side of his old brown Ford and opened the door. I wasn't sure if the gesture was modern chivalry or because only he knew the secret combination of "lift and twist." Dents of various widths and depths decorated both sides of the pickup bed. The tailgate was missing and the tags were expired. The interior of the single cab featured stained cloth upholstery and the original AM/FM radio.

I liked everything about it. That worn-out pickup told me Jim was a real cowboy, not a data analyst with a shiny new crew cab and heated seats who had no clue how to step on a horse that might buck. I scooted onto the bench seat and fastened the seat belt. The cab smelled like dirt, oil, and leather. I also smelled something unfamiliar, masculine, and sprayed from a bottle, but I couldn't tell what brand the cologne was. I wasn't even sure if it was cologne, body spray, or aftershave. I didn't grow up with brothers and had only dated a handful of guys before Jim. Like, a small handful. Probably not even a whole hand. All I knew was that his scent made me want to lean in and inhale deeply. Whatever marketing ploy made him buy it was definitely working.

"Where would you like to eat?" Jim asked politely.

"How about Biltoki's?" I suggested. "You can't go wrong with Basque food."

The food was always good at Biltoki's. Garlicky, but good. The restaurant was in Elko, a full forty-five minutes away. It was a short drive by Nevada ranch

standards but a long time to chitchat with a first date. Between his clean-shaven face and alluring scent, I could hardly look around or breathe without feeling flustered. I rested my right arm on the cracked brown Naugahyde of the pickup door and reminded myself to act normal.

At dinner I ordered a filet mignon and tried not to get lettuce stuck in my teeth. Afterward, we walked down the street to the Silver Dollar Club, a dive bar surrounded by more dives, several all-night casinos, and a couple yuppie eateries. The Saturday night party crowd was still on their first round and starting to get noisy. The career drunks had been at it since yesterday morning, hunched on their barstools and not making eye contact. Cigarette smoke spiraled up from along the bar and the shuffleboard tables. Pockets of white fumes were trapped against the ceiling while swirling clouds escaped out the door to vanish into the night sky.

I suggested we play a game of pool. Jim dug in his pocket for some quarters and racked up the balls. I fancied I knew a little more about the game than the average girl, since I'd taken billiards as an elective in college. My break was weak, but I calculated angles and called my shots well enough to beat Jim (barely) in our first game of eight ball. He consistently sunk what he aimed at, but every time I thought he was going to pull ahead, he fumbled a shot just enough that I regained my lead.

We started another game as I took the first sip of my second gin and tonic. I rested the end of my pool stick on the floor and stood with one leg slightly bent at the knee. I saw Jim look at me out of the corner of his eye from across the pool table. I stood up straight and sucked in my stomach. I knew my small waist was one of my best features, and I wanted to make sure Jim noticed, too.

A middle-aged woman with the wrinkled tan face of a smoker who had spent too much time in the sun approached Jim. Her shirt was synthetic and too tight, but her smile was genuine.

"You know, I just have to ask—are you on the city council?" she asked him.

"City council? No, not me," said Jim, taken aback.

"Oh, well, you just look like an upstanding pillar of the community." The woman laughed and waved her arm in an airy gesture. Jim pondered his open beer for a few seconds.

"I've been called a lot of things, but 'pillar of the community' has never been one of them," he said. He caught my eye over her head and I laughed. I was pretty sure city councilmen didn't live in canvas range teepees and drive pickups with expired tags and missing tailgates. But in his crisply pressed pearl snap shirt, I could see where the woman had gotten the misguided notion that Jim voted on parking meter policies and listened to concerned citizens argue about their need for more public drinking fountains. Or maybe she was just drunk.

After I barely beat Jim at our second game of pool, it felt like time to go. A logical second stop would have been to walk one block south to Stockmen's and its slot machines, blackjack tables, and live band. But the bigger casino meant a bigger party crowd that likely included people one or both of us knew. I wasn't ready to face any of our friends with my date just yet, and I for darn sure wasn't going to stay out all night alone with him, so I asked him to drive me home.

I sat on the passenger side of the bench seat, but I didn't lean my arm on the door this time. I didn't need to remind myself to breathe normally. The cover of darkness and two (or was it three?) gin and tonics had calmed my nerves and loosened my tongue.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"No, I'm an only child."

"Where do your parents live?"

"Colorado."

"Do you have any kids?"

"No."

"Do you do any illegal drugs?"

"No."

"Okay. Good. That would be a deal-breaker."

Relieved that we'd cleared the air on my primary dating hang-up, the conversation progressed easily as Jim drove north on Mountain City Highway.

"I was married for five years," he said.

"Oh."

I hadn't expected that. I instantly imagined five years' worth of matching Christmas stockings. Five years of homemade birthday cakes, Fourth of July

fireworks, and dinner for two every night. He could probably still smell her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

“After my divorce, I just have a few ground rules,” Jim continued. “For example, no sleeping with my friends.”

I looked at him and laughed. That seemed reasonable enough.

The more he told me about his first marriage, the less it bothered me. He’d only lived with his ex-wife for a handful of nonconsecutive months over the course of their union. His family had never liked her, his friends hadn’t attended their wedding, and she’d Maced him at court-ordered counseling. Jim had finally signed divorce papers when he’d learned that his estranged wife had propositioned his close friend in a text message.

I was glad that his longest and most serious prior relationship was a dysfunctional firestorm that had left no smoldering embers. Jim was good-looking, funny, polite, and shaped his cowboy hat to perfection. I was beginning to think I wanted him all to myself.



Jim asked me for a second date before he drove away at the end of our first one. I knew this was a good sign because I had read *The Rules*, a dating book from the late 1990s that was considered by many to be anti-feminist because it encouraged women not to chase men.

Once again, he picked me up on time and took me to dinner.

We decided to see a movie after dinner and had some time to kill before it started, so we stopped at Raley’s and bought a pack of cherry-flavored Swisher Sweets. It was my idea; I’d loved cigars since I was fifteen and my dad offered me one at his then-girlfriend’s Easter party. Jim and I sat in the back of his pickup in front of the strip mall and smoked, with our legs dangling over the edge of the bed where the tailgate should have been. The summer night was dark and cooling, the parking lot mostly empty. An occasional shopper hurried into Raley’s for a late-night frozen pizza or box of beer. Engines roared and faded down the nearby interstate in a steady stream of diesel exhaust and screeching jake brakes.

We puffed and talked as we waited to see *Bad Teacher*. Suggesting an R-rated comedy about a sleazy teacher was a bold move for a second date, but I did it anyway. We probably weren't compatible if he didn't appreciate a girl who laughed at the f-word in public.

Jim and I laughed at all the same parts of the movie.

When he drove me home, I sat on the opposite end of the bench seat. I wasn't moving any closer than the passenger side just yet. Before he opened my door in the driveway, however, I glanced at him just long enough. He instantly leaned across the seat and kissed me, his chin warm and smooth against mine. I kissed him back for a quick second. Then he walked me up the rickety wooden porch steps and asked if he could take me on a third date.

"Yes," I said.

Then I smiled. I could hardly believe that a man had lined me up for a date before finishing the one we were on not once, but twice. I knew this was a really good sign, and not just because of *The Rules*. I didn't need to read a dating book to know he was interested in getting to know me better, and not just as a conversationalist.

Jim turned to face me when we stopped on the porch in front of the door. He put his arms around my waist and kissed me again, longer this time. He didn't need to remove his cowboy hat or even tip it back. I stood so much shorter than him that I raised up onto my toes to meet his lips and our bodies pressed together for a brief moment. His muscles were hard and flat against my soft, compact curves. I smelled his cologne clinging to my shirt after he walked back to his truck. Or was it aftershave? Body spray? I still wasn't sure. All I knew was I couldn't wait to see him again.



We went to dinner in Elko again for our third date. Afterward, we walked around the Biker Rally in a light rain. I slipped my hand in his back pocket on the sidewalk and didn't care who saw.

On the way home, I once again sat on the passenger side of the bench seat, but I laid down and rested my cheek on Jim's leg once we were a few miles

out of town. I wanted to be closer to him, and it made me feel safe, like when I was a little girl, riding home from team ropings with my dad in his white '75 Chevy pickup with step sides and a manual transmission. I'd always get tired partway home and fall asleep to the rise and fall of the gas engine as he shifted up through the gears.

Jim kept one hand on the steering wheel and his eyes focused on the road ahead. He laid his other hand on my hip, over the rounded curve where the front pocket rivet meets the outer seam. I closed my eyes and listened to the diesel engine's rhythmic hum as he drove forty-five miles through the midnight desert to my doorstep.

The engine slowed as Jim turned left off the paved road onto the dirt lane leading to the trailer house. I knew the slowing engine and crunching gravel meant our date was almost over, so I didn't sit up until Jim got out of the cab to open the horse pasture gate.

"Thanks for dinner," I told him when he parked in front of the trailer. "I had a really fun time tonight."

"Me, too," he said.

I smiled but was on edge, sensing the unspoken expectation of a third date. I was extra careful not to invite Jim inside the trailer. There was no telling what that oversized cowboy would talk my body into doing if I let him cross the threshold. Once again, we parted with a warm kiss under the porch light.

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## CHAPTER 2 \* **Don't Call Me Sweetheart**

Jim asked me to go away with him to a three-day rodeo the week after our third date. The thought of spending two nights alone with him unsettled me, but I packed a suitcase and ignored my growing apprehension. I knew Jim expected—or at least anticipated—certain things. I also knew I wasn't ready to do those things. I assumed he'd had sex before, but I still hadn't told him that I hadn't. Of course, we didn't talk about any of these things because I don't like to talk about things that make me uncomfortable.

The drive to the McDermitt Fourth of July Ranch Hand Rodeo took four hours. McDermitt was a middle-of-nowhere town on the Oregon/Nevada border—half of it on the Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation. Jim warned me to stay away from the “rez side” of town at all costs. That was where “people get stabbed and nice girls just don't go.” He said that if I was ever alone in our motel room, I should lock the door and not open it for anyone, no matter what. I believed him, and that's why his friend Hezzie slept in the parking lot that night after banging on our door when Jim had already passed out. I knew



Hez and probably should have opened the door for him, but rules are rules, and I wasn't about to get stabbed.

Jim and his friends drank two cases of beer on the way to McDermitt. By the time we hit the rodeo grounds, the guys were pretty well tuned up. Cowboys rarely get a day off, so the prospect of three days at a rodeo without adult supervision had everyone in a party mood. I wasn't a big drinker and never did like beer, so I stayed sober and smiled a lot. (Which was also how I'd gotten out of several speeding tickets during my teenaged years.)

The guys unloaded their horses at the arena in a dirt parking lot full of dried weeds and gopher holes. Kyla, a friend who'd ridden over with us, and I applied sunscreen and painted our nails by the horse trailer. I was the only woman at the rodeo wearing a dress and sandals. I knew I'd probably get a sunburn and that walking through the stickers and weeds would make my feet itch, but I wore Levis and a cowboy hat most days. I wasn't about to pass up a chance to look cute in public.

I only knew a handful of people at the rodeo, so I was extra glad for Kyla's company. It was nice to have someone to sit with in the grandstand while Jim roped. "Grandstand" might be a bit of an overstatement. The bleachers were old and wooden, paint peeling and mostly gone—too steep to be safe for little kids and too wobbly to be safe for old folks. Most spectators packed an ice chest and pitched a shade canopy just outside the arena fence.

I spectated with Kyla the next morning, too. As the female member of her team, her presence was necessary for entry into the rodeo, but she was only required to saddle up and throw a rope once, during the ladies' steer-stopping event. By contrast, the men on each team competed in four events. The guys all liked going to McDermitt because there were no events that involved manhandling a bovine into a stock trailer or wrestling an animal three times their body weight to the ground. They got to keep a rope in their hand and their butt in the saddle at all times, just like cowboys should.

Later in the day, Kyla and I stood in the dirt just outside the arena fence, behind someone else's shade canopy and a pickup bed full of overweight locals wearing shorts and asking too much of their lawn chairs. The announcer called Jim's name and the chute gate swung open. He rode a black bucking

horse across the arena with one hand gripping his rope and his other hand lifting on the bronc rein. He rode for the full eight seconds, then jumped off on the pickup man when the buzzer sounded. I cheered and smiled, glad he was my brand-new boyfriend.

My smile faded as I began to realize how Jim planned on celebrating his successful ride. Or maybe he was celebrating the Fourth of July, or his first weekend trip with his new girlfriend, or a weekend off from work, or who knows what. Whatever his reason, he celebrated it with a beer in each hand and one in his pocket for later. He'd prepared for the ride the same way, then he drank the rest of the case for good measure. He appeared to be racing his buddies to the bottom of the beer cooler. And if he wasn't in the lead, he was a close second.

Back in Elko County, Jim only drank two beers each time he took me out to dinner. He opened my doors, removed his hat at the table, said thank you to the waitress, and told clean jokes. I liked the earlier version of Jim a lot better than this drunken cowboy, the one with bloodshot eyes whose words were turning mushy and who rode his rope horse with one hand on the reins and the other holding two beer cans stacked on top of each other. When we'd first showed up at the rodeo, I was proud when people realized I was with Jim. On his arm. As his girlfriend. A "taken woman." Claimed by him. But as he got drunker, I became less enthusiastic about thinking of myself as "his."

I slipped away while Jim and his friends were distracted with the rodeo. I walked behind the pickup truck with the overloaded lawn chairs. I passed by pens full of broncs and roping steers at the far end of the arena to avoid the crowd of contestants at the main gate. I didn't want to run into anyone who would ask where I was going. I just wanted to put some distance between myself and Jim.

The hot air assaulted me from all sides during the walk back to the motel. It shot down from the sun and radiated up from the blacktop as I marched a quarter mile back to the cheap, crappy room. My short cotton dress and backless sandals offered little protection from the sweltering elements, but I was too mad to care about the possibility of obtaining a moderate to severe sunburn.

All I could think about was that good-looking, bronc riding, no-good Jim Young.

I stormed down the pavement like a one-woman thundercloud wearing shimmery pink eyeshadow and Insta-Dri nail polish. The Diamond A Motel sat at the south end of the parking lot from McDermitt's main attraction, the Say When Casino. The carpet was dirty and the bathtub was covered in a grimy film that made me wonder if taking a shower actually made me cleaner. I perched on the edge of the motel bed with my legs crossed and tried not to touch anything.

*What should I do?* I'd driven to a rodeo halfway across the state with a man I really liked but didn't know very well. His friends were nice, but they were *his* friends, not mine. I was in a sketchy town in the middle of the desert where drug deals went down in the lobby of my motel every night. I might be stabbed at any moment. And now the man I really liked but didn't know very well was completely wasted, which was a major bummer because one of the reasons I really liked him was because he always seemed so sober.

I left the grungy motel room and walked over to the Say When after Jim and the rest of the crowd made it back to town. Jim put his arm around my shoulders and tried to buy me a drink. I told him no thanks. Then he called me sweetheart, which really pissed me off.

The music was loud and the small casino was crowded with dusty cowboys, women wearing halter tops, and slot machines. Kids ran through the crowd, darted between legs, and dodged elbows to find their parents, then ran back outside to toss water balloons and run relay races in the street for candy prizes. It was easy to slip between bobbing shoulders and sloshing drinks to stay on the opposite side of the room from Jim. Our mutual friends gave me questioning looks and the mean girls casually stepped over to block for me when he tried to catch up.

Out back, a band played on a stage directly across the street from a faded pink crack house, which was next door to another crack house in a more neutral color. Straw bales corralled slow-dancing couples into a potholed parking lot, along with little kids who spun and jumped to their own beat. All the stars came out in the summer sky while the band played Brooks & Dunn and Lynyrd Skynyrd covers.

Jim and I left the Say When about the time all the single people had paired up for the night and the glassy-eyed drunks started telling the same story for

the fourth time. Tension hung in the air of our motel room, dangling in the fluorescent light alongside the dust mites and mildew spores. Loud shouts sporadically burst into the night when someone opened a door to the Say When. Spurs clanked unevenly down the sidewalk in front of our room, stopping every few strides as some cowboy tried to match the number on his key tag to the number on a door.

I stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. I changed into a t-shirt and pair of cotton panties, then huffed over to the double bed without looking at Jim. I climbed in and pulled up the covers.

"I'm not having sex with you," I stated.

"I don't remember asking you to," Jim replied.

He kicked off his boots, undressed and climbed under the covers. I was suddenly hyper-aware of his nearly naked body so close to mine. His chest was broad and his arms were long. I wanted to feel his skin against my skin. I wiggled my foot until it found his calf. He reached for me and I rolled over, pressing my back against his chest. Then he slipped a hand beneath my t-shirt and cupped my breast for the rest of the night.

The next morning, Jim asked me to reach into his duffel bag and hand him a pair of spurs. I unzipped the side pocket and found a daily devotional book and a box of condoms. I had read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, but I had never even held a box of rubbers before.

"Which one of these were you planning to use?" I asked.

"Well, right now I just need the spurs so I can get on my horse and rope," he said. "Could you please hand them to me?"

I handed him the spurs and decided he was a total jerk. What kind of man brought a safe, effective, noninvasive form of birth control on an overnight trip with a woman who he didn't know was a virgin because she was too emotionally immature to talk about sex? I had a hunch that other couples routinely bought and used birth control on weekend getaways, but not me.

I didn't set out to become a twenty-four-year-old virgin. It all started when I failed to switch from horse-crazy to boy-crazy in high school. When the other girls were putting on makeup and spaghetti-strap tank tops for a drive-and-park session on the hill behind the high school, I was still wearing

a waterproof canvas barn coat and loping circles on my barrel-racing horse. I made it through four years at a state college still holding my V-card because I was determined to earn a bachelor's degree before my four-year scholarship ran out. I knew the biggest threat to accomplishing that goal was an unplanned pregnancy.

Saying no was just a part of me by the time I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Business at twenty-one, like my gray felt cowboy hat and brown chaps with the flanky spot on the right thigh. I brought all three, along with a used bedroll my neighbor gave me, when I left California for Nevada at twenty-three to be a professional cowboy. I needed the experienced cowboys to teach me what I needed to know in order to keep a job in the working cowboy world. I wanted them to respect me, not trade stories about what I was like in the sack. Nobody respects the bunkhouse whore.

My few romantic relationships before Jim hadn't been serious enough for my chronic virginity to become an issue, but now here I was in a motel room with a full-grown, red-blooded man who—until the rodeo road trip, anyway—treated me right by day and wanted me by night. And maybe I wanted him to want me.

It was all too much. I had to pull the ripcord.



Jim and the crew dropped me off at Reed Station after the rodeo ended. I barely looked at him as I marched up the gravel driveway carrying my duffel bag. I'd already decided what I was going to do. I didn't look forward to doing it, but I wanted it done.

The next day, I set off to fix a wire gate on the ranch. I took the fencing pliers, a roll of smooth wire, and my cell phone. I knew there was a little patch of service at the top of the hill.

I stood in the warm sunshine on a little sagebrush-covered knob not far off Mountain City Highway, holding a roll of wire in one hand and my shiny blue slide-out phone in the other. I cradled the phone between my shoulder and ear so I could end things with my boyfriend while I mended the fence.

"I'm just not ready for a steady relationship," I said. The words came easier than I expected. "I still want to have some more adventures."

I went on for a few minutes about wanting to start racehorse colts in Kentucky, work on a different ranch in Nevada, maybe go on a mission trip to South America and care for disadvantaged orphans. Jim listened quietly.

"Okay, if that's what you want," he said when I finished talking.

I hung up the phone, relieved that it was done. No more daily phone calls, no more Saturday night dates, no more look of desire in his eyes when he leaned in for a kiss.

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## CHAPTER 3 \* **Elko County Summer**

I lay on a twin bed shoved into the small bedroom at the end of the trailer house and looked up at the ceiling, spotted with yellow rings and splotches of water stains in addition to the fly specks. The bed was there when I moved in. The whole room was filled with books nobody read anymore, outdated clothes, worn-out shoes, broken toys, nonworking oscillating fans, funeral programs, framed pictures, loose pictures, and Lord knows what else crammed into the closet and shoved into dresser drawers. But if I wanted a bit of privacy to talk on the phone, read, or write in my journal, I had to shut myself in with other people's clutter.

And I needed privacy to talk on the phone because even though I'd broken up with Jim, I couldn't resist the pull to be near him. He hadn't ever casually texted at one in the morning. He never suggested we maybe meet up at Stockmen's and then flaked because he saw a blonde. Jim had guided me through doorways with his hand on the small of my back. He could rope a maverick bull and spur a full-grown bronco until it quit bucking.



He was everything wild and reckless in life that I wasn't, yet still craved.

"Hey, it's Jolyn," I said casually into the cordless house phone.

"Hi," Jim replied. "How are you?"

"Good. Just wondering what you've been up to." *You know, since I broke up with you and all.*

"Oh, just ridin' the bad and ropin' the wild," Jim said. "Nothin' too exciting. Me and Dano been kickin' some yearlings around the Perkins. How about you?"

"I've been riding my sale colt and getting Banner ready to show at the Fair."

"That will be good for you."

"Yeah, it should be fun. Did you ever show horses when you worked for Ellisons? I thought I'd heard that they used to send the cowboy crew to the town with show horses every year."

"Ellisons? No, they didn't have show horses when I worked there. Not in my string, anyway."

"Oh, I see. Did you ride the rough string?"

"Nah, I didn't have anything that was too bad. I mean, you had to saddle 'em out in the yard with a hind leg tied up so they didn't kick down your stall, but they weren't too scary."

*Yikes. If that's his definition of "not too scary," then he must be...fearless.*

The conversation turned from bucking horses to mothers, as it so often doesn't. I was beginning to think of Jim as a friend and ally, and I needed a bit of support.

"My mom is coming to visit next month and I'm nervous," I said. "I haven't seen her in over two years."

"My mom calls me almost every day and won't shut up," Jim countered. "Wanna trade?"

I chuckled. I hadn't met Jim's mom, but he'd told me about phone calls during which she complained about how broke she and his dad were from hauling him to high school rodeos fifteen years ago. She went on long enough for him to set down the phone, walk across the house, get a beer out of the fridge, drink half of it, ponder which horse to ride for work the next day, drink the rest of his beer, walk back across the house, and pick up the phone in time to reply, "Uh-huh," when she whined as expected, "Are you even listening to me?"

After a while, Jim and I said goodbye and hung up the phone. I'd gotten the "Jim fix" I wasn't fully aware I'd needed, so I felt satisfied. Jim had gotten a friendly call from an ex-girlfriend, so he probably felt confused. Regardless, I knew I'd get to see him again soon when my boss and I helped the Holland Ranch gather yearling cattle off the summer country.



Ty Van Norman and I stopped our horses on a little sagebrush-covered hill. Ty was my boss, mentor, and one of the few local ranchers willing to hire a woman. We looked up the mountain toward the rest of the crew—a combination of cowboys from his ranch and Mitch's. I swung my leg over the back of my saddle and stepped down to air out my horse's back at the same time Ty did.

I unbuckled the back cinch and let the thick piece of leather dangle beneath my horse, Jubilee. I loosened the front cinch so it hung several inches below his belly, then stood at Jubilee's hip and lifted the back of my saddle. I'd already turned him so that the slight breeze blew directly underneath the wool saddle blanket and cooled the sweaty surface beneath. I rested my elbow on the gray gelding's hindquarters and leaned on him, cocking one leg at the knee.

It was mid-summer in the high desert. The grass was still mostly green but turning brown and crunchy. Thistles had passed full purple bloom and dispersed their fluffy white seeds into the air to drift and replant elsewhere. The mountains in front of us rose up like a great earthen wall, full of jagged canyons and rocky cliffs. Below us lay the foothills, and beyond them were native meadows and creeks still running with snowmelt. Another line of jagged mountains formed the far side of the valley to the west.

Ty was the first to break the silence.

"I feel bad for Jim," he said. "It must be hard to do a day's work with blue balls."

My head snapped around to look at my boss in surprise. He didn't usually make jokes, especially off-color ones. Suddenly I felt like I did in second grade when Chris Clark passed me a love note on the school bus and all the other kids made fun of me. I'd naively thought that no one else had paid attention

to my and Jim's attempted, failed, and now maybe-on-again romance. But at age twenty-four, I should have known that full-grown adults could tell when a full-grown man was interested in a woman.

I forced a chuckle to mask my embarrassment but couldn't think of a witty retort to deflect the attention. Ty and I stood beside our horses for another few minutes, then pulled our cinches tight and remounted to join the rest of the crew. I adjusted my carefully coiled rope over my right thigh and smiled to myself. Maybe I'd tell Jim about Ty's joke when we talked later. He might get a kick out of it.



I nudged my horse into a run and started swinging my rope. Jubilee was known to buck when riders leaned out to throw a loop to catch them off balance at the exact moment they were most vulnerable. The other cowboys told me this, but today I didn't care about the risk of personal injury. I was hot, thirsty, and determined to catch that runaway steer.

I was also tired of not "necking" stuff outside. If you're going to be a cowboy, you need to be able to rope cattle around the neck or by both hind feet as needed. Roping an animal's feet after somebody else has necked it is physically easier on your horse and less mentally stressful for the roper, since you don't have to move at breakneck speed to catch the animal. So far, I had been a full-time "heeler," too timid to run up behind a fast cow and throw my rope at a full gallop. So many things could go wrong—my horse could step in a badger hole and fall down, I could get bucked off, or (worst of all) I could catch the cow but lose my rope and look dumb in front of the crew.

Then one day I overheard Ty tell someone that he seemed to be the only person on the ranch who was able to neck stuff outside. The shame at possibly being considered a coward was worse than the potential danger. It was time to step up my roping game.

That day at the Holland Ranch was my chance to prove myself. I kicked Jubilee until he brought me into position directly behind the fat Hereford yearling, my left hand steering the reins and my right arm swinging my rope as hard

as I could. A semi-truck and trailer roared past barely twenty feet away as we ran full-tilt down the shoulder of the highway. I stood in my stirrups, leaned over the saddle horn, and launched my rope. The loop circled around the steer's neck on the first try. I quickly dallied my rope around my saddle horn and reined the big gelding to a stop. Through no skill of my own but to my great fortune, he never once tried to buck.

The steer stopped to face me when my rope came tight. Now what? Determination had helped me catch the steer, but I had no clue what to do with him after that. I glanced behind me toward the rest of the cowboy crew. Hopefully one of them would come help.

Just then, Jim rode into view. He crested a swell in the sagebrush flat with his hat pulled down tight and his rope in his hand, loop built and ready to swing. He saw me right away and trotted over, riding tall and straight in the saddle. His horse carried his head up with his ears pointed forward.

"Good job," Jim said. "Now, to lead him, just kick your horse up right beside the steer. Keep a little slack in your rope. If that steer wants to trot, you just trot with him."

I followed Jim's instructions and we headed toward the wire gate on the other side of the highway. When the steer walked in the direction I wanted him to go, I gave him some slack in the rope so he could catch his air and be rewarded for going the right way. When he stopped, I stopped my horse and waited for the steer to move toward the gate. Then I steered Jubilee beside him so the loop around his neck would loosen and he could get some more air and another positive reinforcement. I didn't say a word, just followed Jim's instructions and led the steer across the blacktop like I roped and led cattle every day.

As we approached the gate, Ty rode his horse up alongside me and threw another head loop on the steer to offer additional support leading the captured escapee to his new home. I looked straight ahead and kicked the gray horse onward.

Jim rode up behind us and started swinging his rope. I didn't look back like an experienced cowboy would have. I was sick and tired of acting timid and being the backup help, so I locked my eyes on the wire gate up ahead and

spurred Jubilee with both feet. Nobody was gonna have to tell me to hurry up that day.

Suddenly shouts of “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” rose up behind me, followed by laughter. I turned in the saddle to look back. Jim had his rope dallied to his saddle horn, firmly attaching him and his horse to the steer I was leading. His horse had assumed a crouched position as he tried to stop the steer, but he wasn’t able to since I was still forging ahead in the lead. I stopped my horse just before we pulled Jim through an H-brace made of two upright railroad ties with a horizontal piece wedged between them in the fence corner.

“Don’t forget to look back once in a while!” someone called out. I laughed along with the crew. I was also secretly impressed with Jubilee. He’d never faltered or lost stride even while dragging a fat red steer *and* a horse ridden by a tall cowboy. That horse was a powerhouse. (And he hadn’t sent me flying.)



It was Saturday night, and Jim and I were eating dinner together. We were at Lone Mountain Station this time, a solitary outpost consisting of a restaurant/bar/RV park thirty miles north of Elko. Jim bought my dinner even though we weren’t on an official date. He’d also bought dinner for the rest of the crowd because he was generous whether drunk or sober. I liked sitting beside him at the bar while we ate salty tomato-encrusted prime rib and garlic-studded Basque beans.

Jim pounded whiskey, I sipped wine, and we both downed a shot of bourbon when Rolly bought a round for the bar. It looked dark and beautiful in the clear glass, but it tasted like regret and exploding campfires. I had no idea how anyone in Kentucky managed to sell that stuff by the barrel, much less turn a profit and attract repeat customers.

Jim and I slipped out to the parking lot together after a while and left our friends to shoot pool and slide empties across the bar for a refill. The soft yellow light from inside the restaurant slipped out the windows and fell onto the wooden porch, but the icy white starlight took center stage this far from town. There were no other buildings for miles in any direction. There was nothing but

pale green sagebrush desert unfolding into the night around us, the Milky Way above, and the two of us below.

We sat side by side on the edge of his pickup bed, with our legs dangling over the missing tailgate. We didn't touch or make eye contact. I gazed across the parking lot and highway into the rolling hills that I knew lay tucked behind the inky wall of darkness.

The conversation turned to when I'd roped and led the steer alongside the highway a few weeks before.

"You did a good job," Jim slurred. "I's so fuckin' proud of you."

"Really?" I said. I sat a little straighter on the cold metal of the pickup bed. "Thanks. And thanks for your help, too."

I knew Jim was drunk, but the compliment still glowed in the dark. His words affirmed my decision to leave my hometown and ride for my wages. Because while money in the bank was nice, everyone knew that earning the respect of your fellow cowboys was the true reward of a saddle tramp.

Before the warmth of his praise had time to cool, Jim dropped another bomb I wasn't expecting.

"I'm just gonna go ahead and say this," he announced. "I'm in love with you."

"Oh?" I said and looked down. "Thank you."

I knew it was cliché to express gratitude when someone said he loved you, but it was all I could think to do. I was still mostly sober, a condition not generally conducive to midnight-parking-lot confessions of love. I wasn't even sure if Jim's profession was a reflection of his true feelings or just a sappy side effect of too much beer and bourbon. At this point, his brain was basically that exploding campfire.

I stared into the darkness beneath our feet. Somewhere down there was gray gravel and desert sand, probably a few cigarette butts. I smiled. I'd never swapped the L-word with a man before and suddenly found myself halfway there with Jim. I wondered if he would remember saying it the next morning.



A few weeks later, Tilly and I headed to the Holland Ranch to help Mitch and his crew for the day. It was August twenty-fourth, my birthday. It also marked the first ride in my brand-new saddle.

We parked by the wooden corrals in front of the big red barn behind Mitch's house and unloaded our horses. Next, we changed a flat tire on the trailer. We could've hollered at the guys and they would have willingly helped us, but changing a flat on a double-axle trailer is pretty easy when you have that little "ramp thingy." You just drive the remaining good tire on the side with the flat up onto it and start loosening lug nuts. Actually, first you slightly loosen the lug nuts with a tire iron, then you drive up on the ramp. Then you finish removing the lug nuts, remove the flat tire, pop the spare tire onto the axle, replace the lug nuts, drive off the block, fully tighten the lug nuts and bam—you've changed the tire and impressed the guys who didn't even know you needed help until after you'd handled the situation yourselves.

Jim and Dano didn't know we had a flat because they were inside the barn, saddling and graining the horses they'd caught for the day. A cowboy usually gives his horse a scoop of grain to munch on while being brushed and saddled in the morning, sort of a friendly gesture to get the workday off to a good start.

Jim appeared in the barn doorway when we were loading the flat tire into the stock trailer. He stopped and leaned his shoulder against the wide plank door frame while he lit a cigarette. The collar of his denim jacket was turned up and his cowboy hat was pulled down low. He wore off-white chaps covered in dirt, blood, and scars. He took a drag on his Marlboro Red and sent swirls of white smoke rising toward the sky in the gray morning light. He looked sexy as hell.

Tilly and I jumped our horses into Mitch's trailer alongside his crew's. Besides Jim, Dano, and Mitch, a day worker named Moe was also cowboying with us that day. We drove a ways out on the desert and unloaded our horses.

After moving my horse out of the way, I held my lead rope and looked at my saddle. It was the first time I'd seen it strapped onto a horse. The leather was clean and bright, untarnished yet by hours of friction with denim, dirt, and sweat. The shiny stirrups were unscratched by tree limbs and sagebrush.

The horn wrap was clean and fresh, with no dark grooves worn into the fuzzy mule-hide leather by the dallies of a nylon rope. The only features that stood out against the medium red-brown of the thick leather were my grandpa's brand, Slash JL, stamped onto the horn cap and the inscription "John 3:16" carved onto the back of the cantle. I'd spent my first nine years of life on Grandpa Joe's ranch in a remote corner of northern California, and its river and canyons were always with me still.

I couldn't decide if I wanted everyone to look at my new ride or if I hoped no one noticed. I'd spent thousands of dollars and many hours selecting and second-guessing my order specs. I couldn't wait to ride a horse in it but was afraid I'd discover I'd goofed up a major element and the whole thing was an unusable piece of junk. Either way, I had a job to do that day. I checked my cinch, gathered my reins, and swung aboard.

The saddle seat fit perfectly and was just as comfortable as when I'd tried it out on the saddle stand. The new sheepskin lining underneath was full and springy, making my seat a bit higher on my horse's back than it would be after thirty or forty rides, once the wool fibers had packed down. The stirrup leathers were perfectly molded to my legs and twisted at the bottom so they wouldn't sore my ankles.

"How's the new wood?" someone asked.

"So far, so good," I replied.

"Hope it don't leak!"

"Me, too!" I called back. A saddle was said to "leak" if a cowboy was bucked off while riding in it. I hoped my new ride would prove to be watertight.

Owyhee was my mount for the day, and he was not a bronco by any stretch of the imagination. He was a middle-aged sorrel from the nearby Owyhee Indian Reservation. Ty had bought him as a "cavvy horse." Ranches in that region called their saddle herd a "cavvy" and kept it stocked with horses, generally geldings, for their hired hands to ride. Owyhee was tall and gentle with the unusual habit of swinging his head side to side and looking at his rider with alternating eyeballs. It was a bit unnerving, as I wasn't used to making direct eye contact with a horse while riding him in a forward motion.



Mitch dropped the crew off in a line to gather yearlings. We strung out and trotted down the dirt road, cowboys reining in their mounts and turning toward the general direction of the steers as we went. I was dropped off on one of the shorter inside circles.

I rose and fell with Owyhee's rhythmic stride. My saddle creaked as all new leather does and I turned off the road to trot through the sagebrush. My left hand held my rawhide reins just in front of the saddle horn. I bent my right arm at the elbow and loosely held the romal, or end of the reins, near my ribs. I scanned the country ahead of me for cattle and breathed evenly so my muscles could keep up with the aerobic work of posting to Owyhee's long trot. I sat down in my saddle and slowed to a walk when I hit cattle.

"Hey, steer; hey, steer," I called, urging them forward. I slapped my chaps with the end of my romal. Some cowboys could whistle real loud to help cattle move. It sounded cool and I wished I could do it, but I could only ever whistle loudly enough for myself to not quite hear it.

We reached the stock pond and held up our horses to let the cattle drink before the final leg of the drive. I rode Owyhee to the edge of the muddy water and slid my hand forward on his neck to put slack in the reins so he could drink. Cattle spread out around me, forming a continually moving tapestry of black hide, brown dirt, green sagebrush, and splashing water. We still had many miles of wide-open desert country to cover that day without a paved road or motorized vehicle in sight. The other cowboys spread out to water their horses on either side of me, some calling a wisecrack over their shoulders and others looking silently at the pond.

I relaxed in my saddle and looked around, then inward, while we rested the stock. I thought about it all: I sat on a cavvy horse that belonged to an historic Nevada ranch. I rode in my first custom saddle, one purchased with money I'd earned by riding and roping. Grandpa Joe's old rawhide reins hung from my bridle and his brand was just a glance away on my saddle horn. My horse stood on iron shoes that I'd personally nailed on. It was not a bad way to spend my twenty-fifth birthday.

I was most proud of shoeing my own horse. Horseshoeing was a difficult yet necessary skill that I'd recently learned through hours of sweat and aching

muscles. I didn't outright know how to shoe a horse when I left for Nevada, but that didn't stop me from stretching the truth a bit and saying I could. I didn't feel that bad for my white lie. I was hardly the first cowboy to claim false shoeing expertise in order to get a job, then figure it out later. Besides, it was partly true. My dad had worked as a farrier for years and gave me a crash course before I left home. I also had a hand-me-down shoeing outfit made from Dad's old tools and a hoof knife I'd received as a Christmas present.

Ty was particular about how his horses were shod and didn't grant me permission to go at one with a pair of nippers right away. So, I volunteered to help him shoe every horse on the place until I could trim, level, shape, nail, and clinch a set of horseshoes with confidence, or at least a minimal amount of bloodshed. Ty still seemed reluctant to turn me loose as an independent shoer, even though he often mentioned how handy it would be if someone else on the ranch besides him could shoe a horse.

One Friday afternoon, I decided I was done waiting for permission. I knew I could do the job. I waited until Ty left for the day and caught Jubilee. I tacked front shoes on the big gray gelding in the same amount of time it takes an experienced farrier to shoe two horses all the way around. Then I lay down on the floor and died. Horseshoeing was a total body workout that personal trainers knowledgeable in the science of muscle oxygenation and metabolic rates could only hope to achieve for their fittest clients.

The next day, Ty saw what I'd done and didn't fire me. I then shod Jubilee's hind feet and moved on to Owhyee. Women would hardly ever shoe their own horses, but now that I'd demonstrated competence in that area, my confidence grew in my ability to hold a ranch job—maybe even on a new ranch—and keep my adventure going.

After the yearlings watered at the pond, we pushed them across the desert to a fresh pasture and doctored another bunch using medicine carried in our saddle bags. When the last yearling was taken care of and our horses were tied to the trailer, we all gathered around the long dining table in Mitch's house. His family embraced Basque customs of hospitality and cooked traditional meals his forebearers had carried over from the homeland. Many people of Basque ancestry had immigrated to northern Nevada from the Spanish/French border

region. They were known for herding sheep, ranching cattle, and cooking amazing dishes with a heavy hand on the garlic cloves.

Like his father Larry, Mitch was an excellent cook. A perk of helping the Holland Ranch was the delectable feast laid out each day for the crew. Homemade lasagna, lamb chops, fresh garden salad with creamy dressing, and pan-fried venison steaks were standard fare. I looked from one heaping dish to the next while my hollow belly grumbled. The table was silent while everyone wolfed down a few bites, too empty from the day's work to chat. The only sounds were forks scraping on plates and tall glasses of ice water and cold bottles of Coors clunking down on the thick wooden tabletop.

"So, how are things going with Megan?" Mitch asked Jim after a while. "Do you have another date with her?"

I looked up from my salad. *What was this now?*

"It's good," Jim replied. His face looked red, but that was probably just from the beer and heat.

I crunched Romaine lettuce and looked down at my plate. Jim was taking another girl out?

"Is she going back to Washington?" Mitch asked.

"Yeah, I think she's headin' back in a couple months," Jim said in between bites of steak.

Jim was seeing a new woman and had talked about her enough that his boss knew her name and upcoming travel plans? Shoot. And here I thought that he and I might slowly, possibly be heading in the general direction of probably restarting the relationship we'd begun earlier that year. But now it looked like some hussy had beaten me to the punch.

This news was especially hard to digest after the flirty afternoon we'd had. After moving yearlings all morning, we'd trailered to another allotment to check a different set of cattle. Etiquette dictated that the boss loaded his horse in the trailer first, followed by the next most senior guy on the crew, on down to the newbies and neighbor girls. I saw Moe load his horse first (out of order, by the way), so I stood off to the side and pretended to check my cinches until Tilly loaded her horse next to Moe's. I

knew we'd be dropped off in pairs to rope and doctor, and I wanted to be paired with Jim.

Jim let me go first when we trotted up a narrow trail, and I suspected it was just so he could look at my butt. And he was a gentleman and let me throw the first loop at the gimpy heifer we needed to doctor.

But now I didn't know what any of it meant. The phone calls, my wanting to be near him, the L-word in the Lone Mountain parking lot—did it mean we'd get back together, or had I missed my chance completely when I'd broken up with him earlier in the summer?



I settled into my saddle and looked up between my horse's ears. The morning air was still pleasantly cool, and I was alone in the warm-up pen at the fairgrounds. I kept my lower back loose and relaxed my shoulders, allowing my body to merge with the rhythm of Chili's lope. He was a three-year-old colt Ty and I had started that spring and I'd ridden all summer to prepare him for the Van Norman and Friends Production Sale held each fall in Elko. Chili was my special project, and he was loping balanced circles with his head down, just like I'd hoped he would for his first trip to town.

I also hoped Jim would be at the sale. I wanted him to see how good Chili looked. I also wanted him to see how good I looked—slim and trim from riding horses all summer in the heat and working many hours between meals. Ty was a devout Christian who believed in a lot of things, but eating lunch was not one of them. I wore my go-to-town pearl snap shirt, a purple plaid with retro red-and-white piping on the yoke, and the Cruel Girl jeans I'd worn on our first date. My sweat-stained gray felt hat was mashed down on my head like always, because I wasn't affluent enough to afford a specially designated "town hat."

After I loped Chili both directions and felt his coltish energy settle down, I slowed to a walk and rode out of the warm-up pen. I headed toward the barn where the Van Normans stabled their sale horses for the two-day event. My interest level perked up when I saw Dano standing in the wide barn aisle. If Dano was here, Jim was likely nearby.

"Hey, Dano," I said as I swung out of the saddle. "How are you today?"

"I'm good," he replied. "How's your colt doing?"

"He's feelin' pretty good. I'm just riding him around to get him used to all the town stuff."

I scratched Chili beneath the browband of his headstall while I talked. He lowered his head and bobbed it toward me in appreciation for itching his sweaty spots.

"Perfect," Dano said with a smile. It was tough to catch that guy in a bad mood. He held up a headstall. "Jim asked me to give this to you. He went to Vegas with Mitch this weekend."

"Oh. Thanks."

I reached for the headstall and hoped I didn't look as disappointed as I felt that Jim wouldn't be at the horse sale, but I've never been able to hide my emotions from anyone except myself.

"Wow, that looks really nice," I managed.

I turned the headstall over in my hands and admired Jim's quality workmanship and attention to detail. It was a simple, solid, split-ear headstall with beveled edges and "bleeder knots" to tie the cheekpieces around a bit. The bleeder knots made a fishtail design with the leather thongs and lay flat, holding the bit on to the headstall without adding extra bulk. I was impressed he'd finished it so quickly. We'd only just arranged the trade: He would make me a headstall for the new Myler bit I'd recently bought, and I'd make him dinner. I guessed I'd better figure out a menu.



Jim came over and ate syrupy mashed sweet potatoes, cucumber-and-tomato salad with congealed olive oil dressing, and mostly cooked chicken. I'd tried baking an entire chicken in a Crockpot, but it took forever and the dang thing was still pink near the bone by the time Jim showed up. He politely suggested I pop it in the oven to finish the job, then asked for seconds. (I later learned that he hated chicken in all forms and refused to eat it as a general rule.)

During that summer, Tilly had gotten married and moved out of our shared single-wide at Reed Station. This afforded Jim and me more privacy when he came over, although he still slept on the living room floor in a bedroll. But he drove ninety miles round trip to bring me flowers when I got my wisdom teeth removed, and Meg the apple-picker from Washington was no longer in the picture, so it seemed like forward progress was being made.

Jim's seasonal job at the Holland Ranch ended in early October when Mitch shipped the last load of yearlings to their cold-weather homes elsewhere. Jim headed to Texas for the winter and got a job on a preconditioning outfit that operated on outside pasture with an old buddy of his, Joe Harper. In layman's terms, he took care of just-weaned calves and helped them transition from living with their mamas and drinking milk to frolicking with their buddies and eating grass. He liked it because the weather was warm and he got to rope a lot.

I worked for Ty until the first week of October before heading to Elko for the winter. The Van Normans ran pasture cattle, so they also shipped everything each fall, and I was laid off for the winter. I hated to leave the wide-open sagebrush country of the ranch, but I consoled myself with knowing I'd be back again in the spring. I didn't want to return to my hometown in northern California, so I moved to Elko and worked as a substitute teacher in the local school system. I rented a basement room from local legend Allie Bear, "The Knower of All Things," as Jim and I called her. She was divorced, in her sixties, and an outrageously successful cattle buyer for Superior Livestock Auctions. She traveled all over the state of Nevada, connecting ranchers with buyers for their calf crops. She knew everyone and their business.

Allie had a beautiful two-story house on a hill on the edge of town with horse pastures, a barn, and an arena. It seemed like the Taj Mahal after living at Reed Station. Rent was cheap and utilities were included. I often had the place to myself because Allie traveled a lot.

I set out for the hills across the road from Allie's house one cold December day. The wind blew into my face in a series of blasts straight from the coldest glacier in the Arctic. I hunched forward and pulled the hood of my jacket farther over my ears and face. Too much wind always hurt the inside of my ears, made them ache way down deep where I couldn't do anything about it.

I kept walking as fast as I could despite the frigid weather and impending inner ear pain. After all, I had calories to burn. I rode horses all day and stayed in shape without even making a conscious effort in the spring, summer, and fall when I worked for the Van Normans. But my winter job had me sitting behind a desk most hours of the day, so I walked five miles each afternoon after work.

Earlier that day, I'd driven a hundred and twenty-five miles to Winnemucca and interviewed for a full-time staff writing position at the *Nevada Rancher*, a regional ranching magazine. Writing for a living was my second dream job, after cowboying. I'd kept a journal since I was six and once wrote in it that I wanted to be an author when I grew up. I ducked my face toward the desert sand and pushed on into the wind. I pumped my arms to help establish a fast rhythm and hustled through the sagebrush and rocks.

I wondered what the editor and publisher had said about me after I left the interview. I thought I'd answered their questions with intelligence and confidence, but it was hard to know for sure.

My phone rang from my jacket pocket. I pulled it out with a gloved hand and saw the magazine office's phone number on the screen. A good sign? Or maybe they were just calling to thank me for my time.

"Hello, Jolyn?" came Carmen Kofoed's voice through the cell phone. She was the editor of *Nevada Rancher*.

"Yes, hi, Carmen. How are you?"

"Good. I'm calling to make your day, hopefully. Holly and I would like to offer you the writing job if you want it."

I smiled and forgot about the cold.

"Definitely," I said without hesitation. "When do I start?"

"We'll have you start January second. We'd like you to come into the office the first week for training. Then you can work from home, since you live a long way away."

"Great! Looking forward to it. Thank you."

Carmen said she'd see me in a couple weeks and ended the call.

So that was that—I was officially a magazine writer.

I dialed Jim's number as soon as Carmen hung up. He had been my boyfriend again since about three days after he left for Texas, and he was the first person I wanted to tell my good news.

"That's great!" Jim exclaimed. "I'm proud of you. Good job."

"Thanks," I replied, still warm from the news, despite the unrelenting wind. "I know it means I won't get to cowboy as much, but I can still come hang out with you and Dano at the Perkins this summer, right?"

"Yep, you can rope and doctor yearlings with us anytime you want."

My happiness at getting a real writing job dimmed a little as I realized that I wouldn't be a professional cowboy anymore. What any of us do for a living defines a large part of us, whether we like it or not, and I really liked being defined as a "cowboy." Being a writer sounded pretty cool, too, but typing articles wasn't nearly as tough as riding horses that might buck and roping runback calves.

I reminded myself that at least I'd already gotten a cowboy job on my own merit, not because I was dating someone on the crew or I was the manager's daughter. I could check that life goal off the list. It would be weird to move from that lifestyle to sitting in a padded chair within walking distance of the snack box all day, but I could get used to it.

Plus, I was with Jim. That meant I could get out of town and cowboy regularly. I'd seen what it was like to be the girl on the crew; now I'd get to experience what it was like to be the girlfriend on the crew. I knew I couldn't cowboy for a living forever, anyway, because I wanted to have babies eventually. I knew my days as a full-time cowboy were numbered. Jim was the first man who made me think maybe that number was getting pretty small.

A glow of satisfaction repelled the cold by the time I hung up the phone with Jim. I had a great new job, a supportive boyfriend, and the holidays were just around the corner. Within a month I'd be down in Texas to spend New Year's Eve with Jim. The wind could blow until the thermometers burst for all I cared. Right then, everything felt rosy.





Jim was the only man who'd made me think about engagement rings—what they looked like, how much they cost, where they came from, how one would feel on my left hand. I didn't know what width of band or cut of diamond I wanted, but I found myself glancing at the jewelry counter at JC Penney on my way to the clearance rack to pick out a new shirt for my trip to visit Jim in Texas.

I definitely wanted a diamond that was ethically sourced. Wearing a blood diamond mined by a child in Africa would take all the fun out of flashing some bling on my left hand. Maybe I didn't even want a diamond.... Most girls had a diamond. They were a bit overdone, really. I'd always liked emeralds. They were unique and green like my eyes.

I wondered how Jim would propose. Would he ask my dad first? Would he take me to dinner at a restaurant with a real tablecloth and I'd suspect he was going to propose but I wouldn't be totally sure, just wondering why he seemed so distracted and growing more nervous by the minute? Would he deliver a prepared speech or just wing it? Would we kiss afterward, once he'd slipped a ring that was somehow just my size onto my finger?

The ring itself would be a delicate yellow gold band topped with an emerald stone. The whole thing would be a complete surprise, yet somehow exactly what I wanted. Because that's how it happened in the few Hallmark movies I'd watched.

I realized I better figure out my ring size so I could somehow nonchalantly slip it into a conversation with Jim. I hoped he had a pen ready during our next conversation.

"How are the calves doing? Staying pretty healthy after weaning?" I could say during one of our two-hour phone calls.

"Yeah, pretty good. Havin' to doctor a little handful every day or so, but nothin' too major."

"Glad to hear. I wear a size seven ring. Have you been to any team ropings lately?"

He could pretend he didn't hear me but write it down to make sure he got it right. I only had one opportunity to be proposed to. I didn't want him to screw it up.