
BEAR

Rodeo Roughies - Book Two

PATRICIA GREEN



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Patricia Green
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vi

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Chapter 1

The camera pointed at her like a square eye, but black and empty, devoid of friendship or mercy. "Hello, everyone. This is 'Havin' a Sit Down' and I'm Barbie Delaney. Today, my guest is Montana Hiyumese, winner of last year's World Championship title for bareback riding, and currently ranked number one in the world." The second camera's red on-air light lit up as it focused on Montana. "Good evening, Montana, welcome to my parlor."

The set was, indeed, decorated like a personal western parlor, with comfortable suede chairs, burl wood tables, and softly lit table lamps in the background. Barbie sat across from the lanky cowboy, tense and excited about filming the very first live interview of her new series. The format had been her idea and she'd had to wheedle a bit to get the right people to okay the project, but they saw the excitement of having live, candid interviews with a variety of cowboys and rodeo personnel. Anything could happen.

"Thank you for having me here, Barbie. But don't worry about trying to pronounce the Nez Perce word for my last

name. In English it's Bear Claw. Most folks know me as Montana Bear Claw."

"Thank you, Montana. So... What do you want to be when you grow up?"

He chuckled, the sound low, soft, his honeyed voice soothing her ears. "Well, ma'am, I'm twenty-nine years old, plenty grown up, I assure you. But if you're asking what I hope to achieve in this world, I hope to be an example to the youth of my tribe and for all Native American boys and girls, an example of what can be achieved through sport, hard work, persistence, and cooperation."

"Admirable." She would have asked another question, but he interrupted her thoughts.

"So, Barbie, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

She smiled, though she felt anything but happy. He was turning the interview on her. "I'm supposed to be asking the questions, Montana."

"Right. So I shouldn't be askin' you, 'what's your sign?', 'what kind of drink is that?'," he posited, nodding toward the glass of sweet tea on the table to her right. "Or, 'do you come here often?'" His smile was white, casual, confident. Although his posture was good, he looked very comfortable in the brown, suede overstuffed chair.

"No, you shouldn't be."

"And I suppose I shouldn't be expecting to take you to my place after this show is over?"

"Mr. Bear Claw!"

He laughed. "I'm just teasin' you, ma'am. No disrespect intended. I figured if we were having a conversation, it would be two ways."

Touché. She'd forgotten havin' a sit down meant getting to know each other. She smiled again, this time genuinely. "You're right. But no, you shouldn't ask me those questions. We're not in a bar."

"Do you go to bars, Barbie?"

"Ahem." He was flirting with her, on a live interview. Her producer would be livid. Her cheeks got hot. No, she didn't go to bars, though she had been to a few right after she turned twenty-one and her friends insisted on taking her. She had to get the interview back on track. "Let's get back to your rodeo success." He nodded his agreement briefly. "You were quite the phenomenon taking the first world title by a Native American since 1916..."

The interview went well and was a friendly conversation, with a little more flirting mostly consisting of private smiles and eye contact, but she hoped, nothing her producer would notice. Montana was a very appealing man, with strong features, dark skin, and intelligent, deep brown eyes. He smiled easily, his expression focused on her and yet not intimidating at all. His confidence shone through, but he was humble as well, downplaying the feat he had performed and his current success, as though it was a success of his tribal community, rather than a personal one. Barbie thought maybe most of the considerable money he'd earned as a world champion the year before—almost nine-hundred thousand—had gone into the tribe's youth sports program. It wasn't a question she could politely ask.

She did ask him about his primary pastime, however. "I've seen your painting work, which is in quite a few western galleries. Tell me how you became a painter on the side."

For the first time, he looked slightly annoyed. It was just a flash, gone as quickly as it came. "I just dabble."

"Come on, now. Gallery showings are not a small thing, Montana. Your work is breathtaking."

"I just paint what I see, Barbie, mostly rodeo or landscapes on the reservation."

"Your pictures look a lot like you were influenced by the iconic LeRoy Nieman. Would you say that's true?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Nieman was a great artist. I wouldn't ever compare my little paintings to his."

The quality of Montana's paintings was unmistakable. About a dozen galleries dotted throughout the west had collections of his paintings exhibited and for sale. She'd seen photos of them in the gallery brochures, and the network had obtained permission to use some of those catalog photos on-air. They were of rodeo action, horses rearing, cowboys being flung in the air or riding rough stock, gritting their teeth. The landscapes were equally compelling, with sunrises and sunsets in bright colors along with picturesque herds of horses and cattle looking like they were in motion on the canvas. He'd captured the colors and pointillism of Neiman perfectly but added his own spin by picturing the things which meant so much to him.

Seeing his discomfort and noting his terse answers, she changed the subject.

"So, next up is the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo, right across the street from our studios here. You came in second in Fort Worth last year. Do you plan to win this year?"

"I plan to win every rodeo I enter. But my plans don't always go my way. If I get a bad draw, any plan I had goes out the window. Even a good cowboy can't make it on a low-scoring horse."

"Do you consider yourself a good cowboy or a lucky one?"

"It takes some luck to get to the top of the heap, Barbie. And a whole lot of perseverance. How did you get to this point in your career?"

"I... um..."

"You're pretty when you blush."

His compliment made her blush all the harder. "I think we're about out of time here, Montana." They were and she was relieved to have said it. He was way too compelling. She'd have liked to sit close enough to smell his aftershave. She'd bet

it was something like pine and dark musk. The earthy scents would suit him. Or maybe touch the hair he wore in dark, thick braids ending with turquoise and quill bands, matching his hatband.

He gave her a slow smile as the interview ended with stock phrases of "thank you" and "my pleasure."

After the camera lights winked out, she stood and offered her hand. He took it and held it, not shaking it, just holding it in his broad, callused palm. It felt as intimate as a kiss.

Reluctant to break contact, Barbie stood there, staring at him, enjoying the warmth in his hand and his eyes. "Thanks for inviting me over," he said softly.

"It's been my pleasure to have you."

"First interview for your new show, right?"

She nodded, bereft when he let go of her hand.

"You surprised me when you asked about my paintings. It's not a topic I really want known to the other cowboys."

"It's my job to pry."

"It's my choice to be a private person."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not, but that's okay. I knew there was a chance you might make me uncomfortable."

"You didn't resist."

"How could I resist a beautiful woman who is smart and ambitious? Do you know what Marcus Aurelius said about ambition?"

Surprised he'd read Stoic philosophy, she shook her head.

"Ambition means tying your well-being to what other people say or do... Sanity means tying it to your own actions."

"I try to resist falling under my own spell."

"You're trying to resist me, too."

Once again, she felt off balance and tongue-tied. "I-I don't know what you want from me."

"You don't?"

She was beginning to know. Did she really want him to tell her?

"Why don't we have dinner together and talk about it?"

Was it unethical or something? If her boss found out, could he be madder at her than he would be with their on-air flirtation? She was entitled to a private life, right?

"I have to wrap things up here," she told him, though it made her miserable to say it. "Maybe some other time."

"Okay. I'm encouraged you didn't give me a flat out 'no'."

She wanted to encourage him. She wanted to hold his hand again. And she definitely wanted to spend more time with him. "No."

His brow arched.

"I mean, no, I didn't mean to blow you off or say no indirectly. I do have to meet with my boss before I can go. There would be a delay of at least half an hour."

"I can wait." He held up his phone. "I have a book."

She smiled. He was a man of many facets. "Okay. Give me half an hour. You can wait in the green room."

"Will do," he said with a grin as he tipped his black hat and turned to leave.

She watched him walk away, his gait loose, his jeans fitting snugly across his tight behind.

Phillip April stood at the window of his executive office, staring out at the sunset. His hands were clenched behind his lower back, and his knees were stiff as though he was at parade rest. Barbie knew he was a former military man, so she wasn't surprised by his posture, but he did look tense. He didn't even turn when she closed the door. "Sit down."

The chair was comfortable, though not luxurious. Basic

middle-management décor. Waiting for his attention was painful, but fidgeting would only give away her nervousness, so she kept still.

"It won't happen again," he said without preamble. "If it does, you're out and we'll put someone else in. Understood?"

"But—"

He turned to glower at her. The lamp light caught his face and glinted off his gray hair. "No excuses. You were supposed to be in control of the interview. A good interviewer would put things back on track at his first personal comment."

It hadn't been a bad interview. Phillip was over-reacting. Unfortunately, he was in charge of her show and if he was unhappy, she was unhappy, too. He made sure of it. All she could do was say, "Yes, sir."

His posture relaxed a bit. "Look, Barbie, I'm not trying to be mean. But imagine what a return viewer would think if your next interview with a cowboy went the same way. People would start thinking you were a... well, a loose woman. I don't want that. You don't want that either, do you?"

"No, of course not." It had never occurred to her because she couldn't imagine finding some other cowboy who put sparklers in her night sky. It had been a long time since she was on a date, and the last one hadn't gone very well. A slap across the face pretty much guaranteed there would be no second date. But he'd deserved it, the turd. Honestly, trying to feel her up on a first date was beyond stupid and lecherous.

"I'm not that way."

Phillip took a seat in his desk chair. "I know you're not. But the viewers don't know it."

"No, sir. I'll do better with the next interview, I'm sure."

"Is there something between you and Montana Bear Claw?"

"Something?"

It made her cringe when he frowned so darkly. "You know what I mean. Don't be sassy."

"I'd never met him before today."

"But?"

Brazen it out, or mealy-mouth it? "But we're going out to dinner tonight."

"Is that a good idea? You know cowboys are a randy bunch. All that testosterone."

"With all due respect, Mr. April, we're crossing over into my personal life, and while I understand I'm expected to avoid scandal and bad publicity, I don't think my friendships with respectable people need to be scrutinized."

He picked up a pen and moved it from one hand to another as he thought. "Very well. I won't forbid it this time. Just don't let it happen on-air again."

Forbid it? How dare he! It took every ounce of self-control she had not to tell Phillip April to go to Hell. Now she just wanted to flaunt any connection she made with Montana in his face. She knew better than to do anything but remain circumspect, but the nerve of the man.

"No, sir. It won't happen again." Hopefully, he couldn't detect her gritting her teeth.

"Good. Have a good night."

Apparently, she was dismissed. Smoothing down her skirt as she stood, she wished her boss a good night and left him sitting at his desk, watching her.

Tense and upset, Barbie filed the day's papers away at her desk and turned her computer to hibernation, then left the cubicle, heading for the green room and Montana. When she got there, she watched him from outside the window in the door of the room. He was reading on his phone, flicking the pages

rapidly. She stood there for a full minute then opened the door.

"Hi, Montana. What are you reading?"

"Oh, nothing much. I have this interest in philosophy. It's geeky, I know. Probably way boring."

"I took philosophy in college. It made me think. But I was a journalism major. My parents were both on-air reporters."

"Ah, so talent runs in the family."

She smiled, a little sad at the idea. "Well, to hear them tell it, I'm a failure as a reporter because I work for Real Rodeo TV and not a major network."

"Real Rodeo is a major network for a lot of people. It's not politically motivated. It's about sports and the western lifestyle. Very American. I think you could do a lot worse. And call me Bear. It's more personal. My friends call me Bear."

Mom and Dad seemed to think it was only one step above doing news breaks on a porn network. "Let's go. Where are we going to eat?"

"How do you feel about sushi?"

"Love it."

"Great! I don't get it very often as all the roughies I hang out with are steak and potatoes guys. I like to change things up." His stride was confident and friendly as he took her hand and headed for the door. "After you, *sayáq'ic*," he said, holding the door for her.

"*Sayáq'ic*?" It was hard to wrap her tongue around the word.

"Nez Perce. Believe me, I didn't insult you."

Laughing, she got a new burst of warmth from the feel of her hand in his as they strode down the empty after-hours corridor and to his truck.

It took about ten minutes to get to the sushi place. But this was no hole-in-the-wall sushi bar, it was quite upscale, with beautiful Japanese hanging lanterns, pale blue walls painted

with stylized sea waves, and bamboo tables, chairs, and a bamboo sushi bar. It looked clean, classy, and fresh.

"Bar or booth?"

The sushi bar could be fun, but not a place for any kind of intimate conversation. She definitely didn't want distractions while she got to know him better. "Booth, please."

The traditionally-dressed Japanese hostess overheard and at Bear's nod, she led them to a booth near a corner. It was private. A small candle burned near a spindly orchid plant blooming on the table. All in all, it was a very romantic setting.

Bear took off his hat as he waited for Barbie to take a seat, then crawled in across from her. "*Saké* for two, and a pot of green tea," he told the woman. "Thanks."

"You've been here before?" It would be rude to stare at his beautiful black hair, so Barbie tried to focus her attention elsewhere. Elsewhere turned out to be the dangerous-looking bear claw hanging from a leather thong around his neck, framed by the open collar of his shirt.

"Yes, a few times. Whenever I'm in Fort Worth or Dallas. This is my favorite sushi place. Their fish is the absolute freshest."

"Good to know. I like sushi, but I don't get it often as I'm usually traveling with the crew to the big rodeos all over the country. I'm not a fan of random sushi restaurants. You never know what you're going to get."

"We've met before today, you know," he said.

"We have?"

"Your colleague, Cammy Reston, interviewed me after I won the title last year, and you were nearby. She introduced the two of us, but I had to hurry off to talk to other reporters."

"Oh... Yes, I kind of remember that." Actually, she was being coy. Reminded of the day, she remembered it like a thunderclap from a clear blue sky. "You were very popular."

"I guess. I'm not great at interviews, but I kind of got a crash course."

"You did great today."

"Ha! I was a pain in the ass, and I know it."

"Well, I can't say you're high on my boss' Christmas card list."

He chuckled. "Not happy with me, I take it."

"Not happy with either of us."

His expression changed to something like a frown. "He didn't yell at you, did he?"

Phillip April didn't need to resort to yelling. His cold arrogance spoke volumes. You knew when you ticked him off. "No. He's not that kind of guy. But he did warn me not to flirt with the guests again."

"I'm sorry," he said, then leaned back away from her as their hot *saké* and tea were served. When the waitress indicated they could place an order, Bear rolled off a long list of things in Japanese. Barbie recognized a few words, but most of them were a mystery. Before the order was complete, however, he turned his attention to Barbie. "What's your favorite?"

"Flying fish roe with quail egg?"

"Got it. I really like *tobiko* too." He didn't add anything to the list, just nodded and said thank you to the waitress. Barbie knew the custom was to pour the *saké* for the other person, so she filled Bear's cup, and he filled hers. Then, picking up his *saké* cup, he raised it for a toast. "Find happiness everywhere."

"I'll drink to that." They clinked little cups and each took a sip. It was quite hot and astringent.

"So you told me during the interview you'd started in rodeo as a high school student on the reservation. Were you generally athletic?"

"I guess you could say so, but it was about balance. My parents thought I spent too much time reading, so I took up a sport. At first, it was lacrosse. It didn't suit me. A coach

suggested I try riding saddle broncs, and so I gave it a try. In college, I found myself more drawn to bareback riding because there was nothing to interfere with my sense of the animal beneath me. It was just him and me, brute force gentled by finesse. Movement driving the connection between two determined animals."

Oh, yes. The sexual picture he drew, man and woman, intimate, nothing between them but instinct and atavistic urges. She became warm all over. And Bear, the scoundrel, knew exactly what he was doing. He watched her with a subtle cat-has-the-mouse smile, dark eyes twinkling.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He laughed. "Don't do that again, *ayat*."

"Or you'll what?"

"Probably spank your smart ass."

"My ass is not smart." A sense of surprise held her for a moment. "Wait. What do you mean spank me?"

"You know, hand to the butt sort of thing. Have you never been spanked?"

"Of course not." As soon as she said it, she realized it was a lie. She'd had a boyfriend in college who spanked her two times during sexual encounters. She'd liked it well enough, but it never went farther than brief, erotic spanks. But she was not about to discuss such an intimate topic with Montana Bear Claw in the middle of a restaurant.

"You're not telling the truth."

Annoyed, she snapped at him. "Says you! What do you know?"

"I can tell by your guilty expression. You're not a good liar."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. We won't talk about it now. But sometime soon, I will coax it out of you."

"Are we changing the subject now?"

Laughing, he turned toward the waitress who was hurrying over with a big bamboo platter where sushi and sashimi were artfully arranged. Most things Barbie recognized, but some she didn't. She asked Bear what they were and he gave her the English and Japanese words for the fish.

She helped herself, and savored mouthfuls of sweet, succulent fish and tart, soft rice balls. "Mmm."

He nodded as he stuffed a big slice of some roll in his mouth.

They ate for a few minutes, sipping *saké* and tea along with their food. Barbie ate until she was stuffed, then leaned back in the booth, watching Bear finish up the rest of the sushi.

"Where did you learn Japanese?"

"From a menu. I have a good memory for things."

"Despite having your brain wobbling like Jello when you're pounding the living daylight out of your body on a horse."

He shrugged. "Always had a good memory. It helped me in school. Did you do well in school?"

"Yes, in writing and communication. But I sucked at math."

"I like math."

"You are the strangest cowboy I've ever met. And believe me, I've met quite a few."

"Right. With on-the-spot interviews at the events. I hope you haven't been having dinner with all of them afterward."

Perturbed, she shook her head. "Of course not. In fact, you're the only cowboy I've ever been on a date with."

"That's the truth?"

"I thought you could tell when I was lying?"

"Trust but confirm."

"Yes, it's the truth."

"I would hate to be just one in a string of one night stands."

"I don't do one-night stands, including this one. And that's the second and last time I'm going to defend my honor today."

Frowning, he finished his *saké*. "Your boss?"

"Yes, well... I don't want to talk about it."

"Do you want me to punch him in the nose?"

"Can you afford to pay back my student loans?"

"Probably."

Yes, he probably could. He'd made close to a million dollars the year before, and about the same seemed likely this year as well, possibly more. "You're missing the point."

"What is the point, *sayáq'ic*?"

"You can't punch my boss, and I don't need a cowboy fighting my battles for me."

"Is your stance because I'm a cowboy?"

"No. I didn't mean it that way."

He laughed. "I've got you running in circles. You don't need to defend yourself to me. I'm on your side."

She sighed.

"I'm done here," he said. "I would like to take you to my hotel and find out more about your spanking experience, but I think we should call it a day. I have the rodeo, tomorrow morning bright and early, to prepare for. I presume you'll be doing your usual on-the-spot interviews?"

"Yes." She felt a little rejected. It was she who was supposed to say no to sex on a first date. Bear just didn't behave the way she expected. Just as she thought she saw him, he shifted and showed another side of himself. He was a complicated man.

The rodeo would be in town for a few days, so maybe they'd have a chance to do this again.

"So, East Indian food tomorrow night?"

Surprise made her draw in a sharp breath. He was asking her out to dinner again. "I'm still not going to talk about spanking."

"We'll see. Indian or maybe you'd prefer Italian?"

"Indian, please."

"Right after the rodeo," he confirmed. "I'll drive you back to the studio so you can take your own car home tonight."

"Okay. Thanks."

They got out of the booth and he drove her back to her car. Before she could get out of his truck, he took her hand and squeezed it. Then said softly, "Imagine my brown hand coming down hard on your lily-white bottom, *ayat*. Take that to bed with you tonight."

She hadn't known what to say, so she raced away with a quick goodbye as he chuckled.