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# COPPER

Rodeo Roughies - Book Four

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Copper

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

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## Chapter 1

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Solomon was frisky. The horse's handler was doing his best to keep up, but the star bucking bronc wasn't making it easy. Miranda was snapping pictures as fast as her shutter could go. The morning's photoshoot would yield a ton of great shots. Movement behind the horse added some dynamism, generally speaking, but it also had the potential to be distracting.

There seemed to be an argument going on in the distance. Curious, she changed her focus to the background behind Solomon, and saw a cowboy throw down his saddle and yell at his horse. The animal shied away, afraid, but the man kept yelling at it, fury written all over his face and posture. The horse was rolling its eyes and pulling away though he was tied to a rail. Mandy thought it might be an interesting shot, so she worked the camera's shutter. In his fit of pique, the cowboy did a remarkable, reprehensible thing. He punched his horse right in the face. Pain and fear made the horse half-rear, trying to get away, but the cowboy kept yelling at the tied-up animal. No one but the other stock horses and bulls were nearby. Even Solomon's handler had walked off for a break, but Mandy saw it all, her

camera captured it all, and her mind barely wrapped around what she'd witnessed.

The dark-haired, black-hatted, cowboy turned away from the horse, his ire calming, but he looked up and saw Mandy there, camera in hand. He frowned. Mandy tried to remain poised and cool, slowly pulling the camera away from her face and down to her side, but she was terrified by the look of violence in his eyes. He started to stalk toward her. There was enough distance between them, and Solomon, too, so she had time to put her camera in its bag and zip it up quickly. She hurried away from the approaching monster and walked quickly out of the barn toward where the other cowboys and animal handlers had congregated, some smoking, some drinking the arena's bitter coffee.

She lost herself in the crowd, finding a cowboy she knew, whom she figured would accept her company graciously. Having met him at a crowded party a few months prior, she knew him a little bit, or, at least enough to say hello.

Smiling though she didn't feel it, she approached the redheaded saddle bronc rider with the gray hat. "Hey, Copper, how's it going?"

He gave her a brief look of confusion, then smiled, his bright blue eyes crinkling at the corners. There were dimples on either side of his mouth, showing in a charming way on his clean-shaven face. Her heart stopped racing from fear. She felt comfortable and safe around him. He was a tall man and powerfully strong. Mandy was sure he'd protect her from danger should she need it.

Sparing a glance behind her, she didn't see the mean cowboy in the crowd. Maybe he'd gone back in the barn. Hopefully, he wasn't further abusing his horse.

"Hi, Mandy," Copper said genially. "I'm good. You look very pretty today, but your hands are trembling. Is everything okay?"

She looked down at the hand holding her camera bag on her shoulder and realized Copper was right. Her fingers vibrated with upset. Copper was very observant.

"I... Umm. I saw something in the barn that bothered me. There was a cowboy confronting his horse and..."

There was a pause as Mandy tried to find words to describe the horrible event.

"And?"

"And he punched the animal. Right in the face."

Copper's frown was immediate, and his jaw tightened. "Punched it?"

She nodded. "He was yelling first, then he hauled off and smacked the poor horse. I have pictures."

"May I see?"

They were digital so she could show him the thumbnails on her camera view screen. "Sure." Her hands were shaking enough that she had to handle her camera extra-carefully. It took her a moment to get it out of the bag and turn on the viewer. She flipped the photos from the end of the series, finding the damning shots nearly immediately. "Here."

Copper took the camera and looked at the photos in question. Dark red brows dipping down at the bridge of his nose, he mumbled something to himself.

"What?"

"Sorry," he said. "I know that guy. He's Don Jacobs. A tie-down roper."

"Oh. How well do you know him?"

"Not that well. He keeps to himself, for the most part. Seems to have some anger issues, judging by these pictures. He shouldn't be hitting his horse."

"No. Should I do something?"

"Absolutely. You should take these pictures to the Rodeo Cowboys' Association Animal Welfare Board." As he handed the

camera back to her, she couldn't help but see how his eyes had darkened with anger.

"Will that get him in trouble?"

He nodded. "Ought to." After thinking a moment he said, "I'll go get a couple of animal handlers and we'll make sure that horse goes into the outside stable where he'll be harder for Don to get to. It should keep him safe for a while."

"Good idea. But don't confront the guy. He might punch you, too."

"I've been punched before. I daresay I can take care of myself better than this poor, scared horse. Are you done for the day?"

Knowing she didn't have the steady hands or the focused concentration to do more until the rodeo performance later that night, Mandy nodded.

"Hang out here where it's safe. We'll have a cup of coffee." His smile was friendly. Mandy could tell he was being nice, not coming on to her. But at the moment, she just wanted to get back home where she could send the pictures and call the RCA to alert them. It had to be done before any more animal abuse could happen.

"I'll pass. The pictures have to be sent off, and I can't do that from here."

Although he looked a little disappointed, the kind expression never left his face and his eyes had returned to their normal, calm color. "Understandable. I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't mind?"

He tossed his mostly empty paper coffee cup into a trash can and waved for her to go ahead while he followed. "My pleasure. After you."

This time, she smiled back at him, her fear easing up in his strong, capable presence. She preceded him through the group and out into the parking lot where they found her older, light

blue VW Jetta. They approached the rear of the vehicle and she pressed the button to open the locks. He opened the trunk for her. She gave him a thank-you smile and put her camera bag into the car.

After another minute, she was snug in the driver's seat rolling down the window to thank him. He wished her a safe drive and she left, relieved to be away from the arena, but thinking about not only what she saw there, but who she talked to. Copper was a gentle man with a kind way about him, shored up by strength of character and body. She liked him, and wondered why she'd never gotten closer to him in the six months since they'd met. Oh well, the incident had to be taken care of, and she'd soon be back on friendly, if not intimate, terms with Copper. It was just a good thing she was in Oklahoma, with her apartment so nearby, where her things, quiet space and family could give her comfort. Had this happened at the next rodeo, in Texas, where she'd be stuck in a motel, it would have been much more upsetting.

Once safe in her home, she called the RCA and spoke to a person in their Animal Welfare office. He agreed that something needed to be done immediately, and asked that she email copies of the shocking photos directly to him. After their conversation, she sent the photos and received his acknowledgment.

Done. Hopefully, the horse would be safe and other animals would be protected against that Don Jacobs person.

She lay down for a nap, her mind whirling for a time until she fell asleep.

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The Journey Pro Rodeo handlers were at the rodeo doing their best to make their animals shine in the spotlight of the rodeo that night. Solomon was quite the handful for his rider, Cash Richey. He bucked the world champion off about six seconds into the

ride. Cash wasn't hurt and didn't take it badly. Sometimes even the best cowboys weren't quite good enough to best a really rank animal. It was Solomon's night.

Later, another Journey entry came up, a bull named Pucky. He was also rank, scoring high numbers, but the cowboy stayed on his back for the full eight seconds, and the ride was a winner for both.

Mandy took a slew of pictures of the Journey star animals, which was her job as the Journey photographer. The best of her pictures could lead to contracts for the company, as various rodeos and breeders looked for winners to sponsor or hire as studs. Journey was serious about their marketing, and Mandy's pictures were an integral component.

Once the rodeo was over, she gathered up her things and was preparing to leave when Copper Turner approached her.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded and smiled, pushing a thick lock of her nearly-black hair behind an ear. "I did what had to be done. It's up to the committee to do the rest."

He manipulated the loose bronc rein in his hands, working the strands back into place after his earlier ride. He hadn't won that night, but he was a good performer, so Mandy knew it wasn't a steady state of affairs for him. "They already did it," he told her.

"They did? What did they do?"

"I heard they suspended him until further notice. They're going to have a meeting in the near future to decide on whatever other actions they ought to take."

"Wow."

"He's in hot water, that's for sure." His tone was grim, serious. "But it's only as it should be. We can't have people abusing the animals."

"No, definitely not." She shifted the heavy camera bag on her shoulder.



"Up for a little dinner? We could go to Wildwood. I live about an hour away, so I'm familiar with the places around here."

"I live in Tulsa! What a coincidence!"

He grinned, white teeth bright between his lips. "Not too much. There are a lot of Oklahoma cowboys."

Nodding her agreement, she considered going on a date with him. She didn't know his current girlfriend status. He'd been with a girl at the party six months ago, but a lot could change in six months. "Um..."

"Sorry. I didn't know you were married."

"Oh, I'm not married! Are you?"

"Nope. Boyfriend?"

"Not for a while."

"I don't have a girlfriend either." He chuckled. "At least we wouldn't be cheating on anyone. But it's only dinner, and if you don't want to go, that's okay. I won't insist or anything."

She almost wished he *would* insist. It was hard to tell if he had more than a very casual interest in her. Copper was somewhat enigmatic that way. But she liked him and would like to explore if they had anything in common. He was easy on the eyes and polite, both things she found appealing.

"Wildwood sounds good," she said, agreeing to the date.

"Let me carry your bag for you," he offered, holding out the hand that wasn't tangled in the bronc rein. "It looks heavy."

It was heavy. Her telephoto camera lens all by itself weighed more than three pounds. The camera another two. Her tripod even more. And there were other lenses and a variety of tools she needed. Nodding, she handed over the bag. He handled it as though it was a feather.

"Mind if we take my truck?"

"That's fine."

They wound their way through the chutes and out of the barn, Copper saying good night to quite a few cowboys as they

passed. Clearly, he'd made friends on the circuit and was a friendly guy. The participants' parking lot wasn't far, and soon she saw his silver RAM truck. It was like thirty other trucks in the lot, except for the two small decals on the back window. The one on the left was an American flag with an eagle superimposed in front of it. The one on the right was a Marine Corps symbol. Copper must have noticed where her eyes had traveled.

"God, country and family," he said with a smile. "I was a Marine for five years."

"Thank you for your service."

"You're welcome. Thank you for being a beautiful lady who respects the military."

A slight blush heated her cheeks. She hadn't dressed up for the work shift, wearing her favorite navy t-shirt with its bright yellow Journey Pro Rodeo logo on the chest. Her jeans were old and a bit worn at the knees. But he thought her beautiful. It felt nice.

He held the door open for her and helped her step up into the truck and get seated. Her camera bag went into the back where it was covered by a black blanket. It blended into the black interior like a shadow.

Wildwood wasn't far, but there was a wait to be seated. They made small talk as they waited, but were at a table before it got awkward.

The waitress came by right away and took their drink orders.

"I recommend the prime rib," he said, pointing to the menu she held in her hands. She saw the price and knew it wasn't for her. It must have been reflected on her face. "Dinner's on me," he said.

She tried not to bristle. "I can pay for myself."

"You pay next time."

Would there be a next time? They hadn't even gotten through this first time yet!

"I don't know..."

"Have the prime rib."

Prime rib did sound awfully good. "Okay, but I pay next time."

He grinned. "I'll hold you to it."

"We may have to go to Denny's."

Laughing, he accepted his drink from the waitress and ordered for them.

They chatted about Oklahoma for a bit. He was born in North Tulsa but had a little ranch outside the city near Bartlesville. To her surprise, he raised saddle broncs there and was working on breaking into the stock contractor industry. It was his after-rodeo goal. He had a herd and some promising candidates and had even gotten two of his horses into smaller rodeos in Oklahoma and Texas. Copper seemed proud of what he'd achieved so far, but level-headed about where it could go and how fast. He seemed so dynamic and self-assured.

"I know a little about the stock contractor business," she told him. "I work for Journey."

"Aren't they going to be unhappy if they know you went to dinner with a 'rival' contractor?"

Mandy hadn't thought about that. The folks at Journey were pretty reasonable and Copper's contractor business was not really a rival yet. Plus, she didn't know any trade secrets. "I'm sure it'll be okay."

"If you're sure. I don't want to get you into trouble."

"It'll be fine. I'm entitled to have a life."

They were served their dinner shortly thereafter, and it looked and smelled fantastic. Mandy's mouth watered at first sight of it. Although it was too big for her to finish, she was sure going to make a dent in it.

They chatted between bites. At one point, he pointed to the outside of his lips and nodded at her. Apparently, she had food where it didn't belong. Embarrassed, she wiped it away with her

napkin. Copper nodded and smiled when it was gone. Good grief. He must think her a slob.

Trying to recover from her mortification, she found out more about him as they ate.

"So, tell me about being a Marine."

He shrugged. "I was an MP. A cop. I saw a lot of bad behavior. Marines tend to be testosterone-fueled and some are very hot-headed. But most are good guys and women. They sometimes make stupid mistakes is all. I was in Afghanistan for three tours and at Pendleton for two years."

"Is that how you got your nickname, because you were a military cop?"

"That and my hair."

"Was it scary?"

"My hair is always scary," he said with a chuckle.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know." Eating, he didn't respond right away. It looked like he was thinking about how to answer her question. "Sometimes it was scary."

"I'll bet it was dangerous."

He gave her a smile. "All military deployments are dangerous."

She'd eaten her fill, so she put her utensils down and pressed back into the booth across from him. "Evasive answer."

"Yup. Let's talk about you. Did you go to college?"

"No. I spent a couple of years as an apprentice to Emmanuel Le Hibou. That was in New York."

"I've heard of him, but I can't say I'd recognize his work. You must have liked it, or you'd be doing something else."

"Yes. He was quite the taskmaster and I didn't like New York, but I did enjoy the work and I learned a lot while I was there. Emmanuel is a genius with a camera."

"And now you work for Journey taking their pictures."

She nodded and watched as he finished up his dinner. "How did you get into rodeo after the Marines?"

"Long story for another date. Are you going to be in Red Rock on Wednesday?"

That was the next rodeo on the professional circuit in their zone. Mandy went to all the rodeos where Solomon and Pucky were participating. She told Copper she'd be there.

His smile was infectious. "You owe me a dinner, so let's do this again in Red Rock."

Did she want to go out with him again? Now that she knew him better, she was enjoying the beginning of the relationship. "Okay. If you have time."

"For you, Mandy, I have lots of time."

A warm feeling stole over her and suddenly she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. She looked at his lips. They were appealing and smiling.

"I know what you're thinking," he told her.

Caught! Her face heated. "I... Umm..."

The waitress came back with his credit card and the moment was broken.

Not too long later, they exchanged phone numbers and Copper saw her off in her car.

She got home and ten minutes later her phone chimed. Copper had texted her.

*"Home?"*

She responded with a text message. *"Yes. You?"*

He sent her a thumbs-up emoji, then wrote, *"I had a good time tonight."*

*"Me, too."*

*"Wednesday. I'll look forward to it."*

*"Me, too."*

*"Will you be asking for a kiss again?"*

Although he couldn't see her, she knew her face was red. *"I didn't ask for a kiss,"* she wrote a little defensively.

A laughing emoji was his response.

*"See you soon."*

*"Okay. Bye."*

Later that night, as she snuggled up in her bed with her fragrant, summer-weight blanket fresh from the linen closet, she thought about a kiss. Was Copper a good kisser? The notion plagued her until she fell asleep.