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# ROWDY

Rodeo Roughies Book One

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Chapter 1

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**T**he fountains in front of the Bellagio Hotel flashed brightly in the sunshine, creating prisms on the water pools and rainbows in the sparkling mist. The four of them stood among the other tourists in rapt attention as they watched the water show. Gretchen held her little daughter, Amy's hand, knowing they were safe among the many people, guarded diligently by Bob and Melody. Since winning the Mega Millions Lottery, Gretchen and Amy had become targets for potential kidnappers and extortionists. Nine-hundred-million dollars did that for you. But Bob and Melody were vigilant, preventing people from getting near.

Although she was focused on the fountain show, Gretchen felt their bodyguards shuffle closer and caught them stiffening up in the periphery of her vision. When she turned, she saw a man in a cowboy hat and boots approaching. His smile was white in the sunlight, his eyes friendly, bright blue, with small crinkles at the corners as though he was often in the sun.

"Little girl!" he called out, clearly meaning Amy. He had her rag doll in one large hand. "You lost your doll." He came

close enough for Bob and Melody to form a wall between mother, daughter and the man.

"Miss Daisy!" Amy shouted, pushing against Melody's legs to get by. Melody didn't budge. Bob stiffened and bristled. The situation could get out-of-hand quickly.

"Let him come through," Gretchen said calmly. Bob and Melody were steadfast. "He's got Amy's doll, guys. Let him give it to her. Let's be polite."

Bob hmphed and did not budge.

Gretchen put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. His muscles didn't give way even an iota, but the big, black man didn't shrug her off. "Bob, back off."

"It's not safe," the big man said succinctly, never moving his gaze from the cowboy who approached.

Gretchen was reminded of the cowboys who worked her family's ranch as she was growing up. They'd always treated her with respect and kindness, even when she was being a pesky kid always underfoot.

Amy was trying to squeeze around Melody's legs, putting all her five-year-old effort into it, but Melody just moved from side to side, preventing the little girl from getting by.

The cowboy stopped before the group, looking rather puzzled by the two stiff people standing between him and the little girl whose doll he held. "Um... she lost her doll?"

Melody reached for the toy, but the cowboy didn't release it. Instead, he hunkered down and peered around Melody to see Amy. Amy snaked her hand around Melody's legs. "Miss Daisy must've snuck away," Amy told the cowboy.

"She must have," he told the little girl, his drawl clear now since Gretchen could hear him well. Once again, he reminded her of the Western men she knew from childhood. Even her father and mother spoke with a country twang. Gretchen had been told she had a light accent as well, but she didn't hear it in

herself. He handed Amy her doll, but before he stood again, he made a little conversation with the child. "I have a mare named Daisy. She's what's called a blue roan, which means her hair is kind of like dark blue. She's almost as pretty as your Miss Daisy."

"What's a mare?"

"A girl horse, little lady."

"Oh, my grandma had a horse. I don't think she does anymore." Then Amy asked the question she asked every male she met. "Are you my daddy?"

Gretchen immediately felt her face flame. It was so awkward. She usually laughed it off nervously, but for some reason, with this man she was embarrassed. "Amy, I asked you not to do that," she said to her child.

"But I wanna know!"

The cowboy shifted a little and pushed his hat back away from his forehead a bit. "No, peanut, I'm not your daddy." He eyed Bob and Amy saw where his gaze went.

"That's just Bob. He's not anybody's daddy," Amy explained.

"Ah. Well, I'm not him, I'm sorry." He stood and Amy walked back a few steps to take Gretchen's hand with the hand not clutching the doll.

Gretchen peered past Bob and the cowboy smiled at her. "Really, Bob, let me at least look at the man while I talk to him."

Bob hmphed again but moved a few inches to the right. Gretchen could now clearly see the face of the cowboy. And a handsome face it was! He had well-defined features, with dark brows and dark hair. His sideburns were long though his hair was short. Standing near six feet tall, his shoulders were broad, but he wasn't bulky. He continued to smile at them, despite Bob and Melody's aggressive postures.

"Thank you," Gretchen told him. "She loves her doll."

"I figured. My little sister was mighty close to her dolls, too."

Taking a chance Bob would surely reprimand her for in a few minutes, she reached between Bob and Melody and shook the man's hand when he offered it. "I'm Rowdy Jackson," he told her, his grip firm but not painful, his palm warm against hers, fingers slightly callused.

"I'm Gr-"

"Unavailable," Bob said, gruffly interrupting.

Gretchen sighed. Rowdy looked from Bob to Gretchen. "Of course. I didn't intend to offend you or your wife, mister." He tipped his black hat, beginning to turn away.

For some reason, Gretchen didn't want the encounter to end badly, so before he walked away, she said, "Bob's not my husband, Rowdy."

"I see," he said, though his expression said otherwise. "Well, have a pleasant afternoon."

Having finished his business, he once again tipped his hat and walked around the small group and into the crowd.

Gretchen smacked Bob on the back of his shoulder. "You big oaf. I'm not a glass Christmas ornament. You have to let me talk to people sometimes!"

Melody bent to take Amy's doll and look it over carefully for threats. Gretchen was so tired of this, but she also knew it was a necessary measure. Everyone wanted a piece of her money, and some people were willing to do almost anything to get a share.

Bob didn't reply to her temper but silently went back on guard with a more casual pose.

Gretchen sighed, turning back to the fountains, her daughter clinging to her hand. "Just another day in lock-down," she mumbled.

"He coulda been my daddy," Amy said wistfully nearby. "He coulda."

Ignoring the sensitive issue, Gretchen gave Amy's hand a squeeze and focused on the freedom of the sparkling fountains dancing in front of her.

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The evening was chilly, the nighttime desert holding no heat. The ballroom was hot, as though the air conditioning wasn't up to the many bodies crowded into the modest space. Christmas decorations festooned every pillar and table. Bob had wandered a few yards away, her security less in question as the attendees had all been shuffled through a metal detector and the ladies' purses had been searched. There were more than a few millionaires in the room and at least one billionaire, so security had been very tight for the event. The Western Coalition of Food Banks wasn't taking any chances with their important donors, and for this award ceremony, Gretchen was considered pretty important.

There had been a small break in the glad-handing, however, which gave Gretchen a chance to catch her breath and have some peace. She wasn't worried about Amy, since the little girl was nearby in the Sky Villa at the Palms, where Melody guarded her efficiently and kindly. Melody treated Amy like she was her own daughter, giving her attention and care the same as Gretchen did. In a small way, Gretchen resented the relationship Amy had with Melody, because Gretchen was often called away to do *'millionaire stuff'* as she thought of it.

It was tiresome and often confusing, but thankfully, she had a really good business manager handling her affairs. Harry was a gem, offering her advice and adding good business acumen to the mix of professionals Gretchen suddenly supported. The past year since she won the lottery and went from struggling single parent waitress to mega millionaire had

been one trial after another. Without Harry, Bob and Melody, each of whom she trusted implicitly, Gretchen would now be poor as a church mouse despite her winnings. She knew she wasn't great at handling money because she'd never had any to manage.

Lost in her thoughts, she started when a familiar deep voice spoke from behind her. "Hello, Ms. Unavailable."

She turned to find Rowdy Jackson standing a few feet away, smiling at her in his friendly, easy-going way. He wore a tuxedo, but with a string tie. His cowboy hat was a fixture on his head, and his black cowboy boots were embroidered with red thread and had been buffed to a luster. "Hello, to you, too!" Grinning back at him, she felt the attraction she'd experienced over by the fountains earlier. She glanced around, looking for Bob, but her bodyguard had melted into the crowd. No doubt watching her like a hawk.

Gretchen had noticed a few more dressed up cowboys among the crowd and assumed they were there because the rodeo finals were held around Christmastime in Las Vegas.

"Rowdy Jackson, ma'am." He tipped his hat.

"I remember. I didn't get a chance to introduce myself earlier. I'm Gretchen Nelson." She offered her hand and he shook it, their fingers lingering for a few seconds longer than necessary.

"Your boyfriend wasn't taking kindly to your talking to a stranger."

"He's not my boyfriend, he's my—" Bob came up and took her elbow, interrupting her again.

"They're looking for you, Gretchen. Time for the presentation."

Sighing, Gretchen turned from Bob to Rowdy, though she was being pulled away firmly. "It was good seeing you again, Rowdy."

"Yes, ma'am. Same here."



She let Bob lead her through the crowd until they were met by the event organizer, who escorted her up to the podium and told her where to stand. After a few moments, as silence settled over the room, the ceremony started.

The Executive Director of the Western Coalition of Food Banks began with a little speech about how important donors were, how they couldn't operate without them, how valuable their services were to communities throughout the western US, and how delighted they were to once again offer their personal thanks to someone who had given a particularly generous donation. "I'm delighted to introduce you to this year's honoree, Ms. Gretchen Nelson."

Gretchen had taken her notes out of her small clutch purse before handing the bag to Bob, so she was prepared when the mic was turned over to her. "Thank you, Victor, I am very glad my donation went to such a worthwhile cause, a cause near and dear to my heart. Only two years ago, I was dependent on the food banks in the Reno area. As a single parent and minimum wage worker, I had few resources and little hope to change things. The food bank provided my daughter and I with a source of nutritious meals when times were their toughest. When I won the lottery, the first place I wanted to give a donation was to the Coalition. They'd been a lifeline for my little family, and I hoped to be a lifeline for them as I know many charities struggle from year to year, especially during economic downturns.

"The food banks affiliated with the Coalition are straightforward and trustworthy. They don't play politics. They don't rely on cronies. They ask for donations from people who can afford it, and they use those donations, not on exorbitant salaries for executives, but on the bread and butter, pun intended, of their mission." There was a smattering of giggles for her pun. She went on without a break. "My donation was just the beginning of what was already a reciprocal relation-

ship. They gave to me when I needed it and I'll never forget it. The least I can do is give some back to help others who are living from paycheck to paycheck and barely getting by." She paused, looking over the audience, hoping she might shake the money tree for the Coalition a bit. "I hope you all will join me in supporting this worthwhile cause, providing the needy with the food sustaining them every day."

People clapped enthusiastically, and Victor returned to the mic after shaking her hand. He turned to his assistant nearby. "Renata?" The young, pretty Latina handed him a modest bronze sculpture of a cornucopia brimming with fruit and vegetables with a plaque attached. He offered it to Gretchen and they paused in the handoff while camera flashes went off. Gretchen smiled, though she found the entire thing rather too much publicity. She'd given the three million dollars to them for the very reasons she'd said in her little speech: they'd done a good deed for her when she needed a hand, and now she was doing a good deed back. It really was simple. All this foofaraw was slightly embarrassing. She didn't feel her donation was *largess*. It was just the right thing to do. She had so much. Giving some away was one way of keeping in touch with people she respected, even while she was being sheltered from everyone else.

After the pictures, she stood there with the little statue while Victor wrapped up the ceremony, putting in his pitch to the donors because it was his job to make sure the charity stayed afloat, and donations were the only way. People were quick to forget how important the cause was if they weren't reminded every so often.

When Victor was done, everyone was escorted off the stage and Renata took charge of the statue so Gretchen wouldn't have to carry it around for the rest of the evening.

There was a crowd as she walked away, and each person seemed to want to shake her hand and hand her a business

card. She tried not to be cynical and think everyone was looking for something from her: business, a donation, or a paycheck. She greeted everyone politely and listened to them within the scope of the many demands they made upon her time and attention but planned to hand all the business cards over to Harry and let him sort out what to do with them. If someone struck her as particularly interesting, she'd make a note on the back of the card before turning it in.

After the initial rush, there was a break for dinner, the usual conference chicken, and Gretchen had to be *'on'* throughout. It was exhausting to have to smile at everyone for so long and never cringe when someone's perfume was too strong, or their breath was bad, or their witty repartee was anything but. Eventually, however, the music changed from Christmas chamber music to an old-fashioned foxtrot. That's when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Rowdy stood behind her. "Are you free for this dance, Ms. Nelson?"

For this request, her smile was genuine. Bob was nearby but didn't do more than frown, his dark face fixing Rowdy with a suspicious scowl. "Yes, I am, Mr. Jackson."

"Rowdy, please," he said, taking her hand and guiding her from her chair to the dance floor. "I'm not a great dancer," he explained, "but I thought maybe this was a good way to get a few sentences in before we got interrupted again."

She laughed. "Good thinking." His shoulder was warm and firm beneath her hand, his grip on her hand steady and easy. There was a pause as they stepped around a few paces. It was true, he wasn't a great dancer, but then, neither was she, so she could hardly complain. She didn't want to complain anyway. It was delightful to have Rowdy standing so close. "I really must apologize for all the interruptions. Bob is my body-guard. The woman on the street today is my daughter's body-guard, Melody. I won a lottery and ever since..."

"I can imagine," he said. "I recently won a million dollars at the America's Pride Rodeo and all sorts of people came out of the woodwork, scuttling around like rats in the hay barn. People I hadn't seen since junior high school found me."

Gretchen could relate. "Then you know exactly what I mean."

"Yeah, in a small way, I do. Though I'm just a cowboy. Money don't matter so much to me."

Having grown up on a horse ranch near Reno, Gretchen was well-acquainted with rodeo, though it had been a number of years since she followed it. Having left home, pregnant at seventeen, sports had been the furthest thing from her mind. The America's Pride Rodeo, however, was a huge deal, and winning the million-dollar prize meant he'd won in his event having come up through the ranks rather than being a special invitee. They didn't give it away every year, simply because so few people could achieve the goal.

"Are you here for the finals?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I've been lucky this year."

"What's your event?"

"Bareback."

"Wow. A tough event."

"They're all tough. Maybe I just get a little more battered around."

She grinned. Bareback was the most physically intense event at the rodeo. Bareback riders were almost always working despite an injury. "You're very courageous."

He looked a little embarrassed. "I don't know about that. I just want to make my eight seconds."

"A long time to be on a bucking horse without a saddle."

"For those eight seconds you think you're about to die," he told her. "It's the most exciting eight seconds you can imagine."

"I'll bet." She thought a Ferris wheel was exciting. There

was no imagining being tossed around on a horse, holding on with just one hand.

They danced for a few more beats before she leaned in and whispered, "I hate this music."

He whispered back. "Me, too. Give me some good ole Dirks Bentley, Miranda Lambert or Sugarland any day."

"Yes!" she enthused. "I like your taste."

He smiled brightly. "Thank you."

They chatted about music for a short time but then the foxtrot ended and they had to leave the floor. Rowdy guided her back toward her chair. The chair next to hers was empty for the moment, so she gestured for Rowdy to sit down. He hesitated but did.

"You're not the only cowboy here."

"No. Just the top five champions in each event were invited. I think we're supposed to be the Western flavor."

"It's probably my fault," she told him. "They know I come from a Western ranching background. I had to tell them when they asked for a bio."

Nodding, Rowdy, asked, "Do you have a ranch near Reno?"

"No. My parents had a ranch near Reno. It's where I grew up." She didn't want to talk about painful memories, so she steered the conversation back at him.

"Where are you from?"

"Idaho."

"Twin Falls?"

"Rexburg."

"I've never heard of it."

He laughed. "No one has."

She grinned back. His laugh was infectious. A waiter brought them champagne, offering Rowdy a fresh glass. Rowdy turned it down but nodded for Gretchen to partake without him. "Training regimen?"

"Yep. I don't drink much. I have a beer or a whisky now and then, but rarely more."

"Very disciplined of you."

"Everyone has vices," he reminded her. "Drinking isn't one of mine, is all."

She was feeling comfortable with him, so she flirted a little. "What is your vice, Rowdy?"

He smiled and winked. "Not tellin'."

"I can guess."

"Doubtful."

"You gamble?"

"Nope."

"You smoke?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Not when I like to breathe," he quipped.

"You take drugs?"

"Do I look like a druggie to you?"

She took the opportunity to look him over well. He'd as much as given his permission, she told herself. "No, you don't." After a pause, she asked, "You chase women?" He blushed. It was so remarkable, Gretchen giggled. "I've guessed it! I have!"

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid it's the opposite."

Confusion swept over her. "You mean, they chase you?"

He looked embarrassed. "Maybe. Sometimes."

He was a very handsome, masculine man, it would be weird if women didn't chase after him. "I'll bet they do. Well, I can't guess your vice."

"Just as well."

"Will you ever tell me?"

"Maybe." He smiled, his embarrassment gone. "Depends on if you'll let me see you again."

"Are you asking me out, Mr. Rowdy Jackson?"

"Breakfast tomorrow?"

Was he insinuating they'd be together all night first? Because if he was...

"Not like that," he explained, reading her mind. "I'll pick you up and we'll go to the diner where the cowboys grab breakfast. The food is good."

Not knowing if it was better or worse, she decided it was better to start slow. Although, he was a mighty tempting fellow, she hadn't been with a man since she'd gotten pregnant with Amy six years ago. Now was not the time to change her ways. "I'd like to have breakfast with you."

She told him her hotel and her cell phone number. Bob would have a cow.

"Very well, Gretchen," Rowdy said, offering his hand as the dance music turned to a two-step. "One more dance?"

"I'd be delighted."

One more dance became five more and then the band stopped playing for the night. It was clear they had to leave. Bob came up to Gretchen's side as Rowdy released her on the dance floor at the end of the music.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Rowdy told her. "Eight AM."

"I'll be waiting."

He flicked his eyes toward Bob, then focused on Gretchen. "Good night, Gretchen." He tipped his hat and gave her a good-bye nod.

She smiled. "Good night, Rowdy."

Bob was frowning as she turned from watching Rowdy saunter away. "What?" she asked.

He continued to frown, dark brows drawn together over his slightly crooked broad nose. "Tomorrow?"

"We're having breakfast together," she explained, holding up her hand to brook no argument. "That's final."

"Gretchen, you don't know him. He might be bad news."

"I want to have a life, Bob. You can come along."

"You bet I will."

"Bob... you work for me, remember?"

He looked hurt. "Sure. But you trust me to take care of you, don't you?"

Sighing, she agreed.

"Let's get you back to the Palms."

"Yes, Bob. Eight o'clock comes early."

He snorted.

"Don't be a spoilsport. I'm going on the first date I've had in years and you aren't going to ruin it for me."

A resigned look passed over his features. "Time to go."

She practically skipped out of the ballroom. "I wonder what I should wear?" she mumbled, grinning all the way to the limo.