

ASPEN GOLD SERIES

Gorgeous
Scars

M.A. Jewell

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Prologue

A fog unwrapped itself from her mind, and she sensed that she had risen from these same depths countless times before. Something held her eyelids closed, and sparks of color flitted across the dark nothingness. Finally, a piecemeal awareness intruded. Maybe she had fallen asleep.

She recalled sipping wine—a robust red. Instead of the merlot’s savory notes, the taste of plastic filled her palate. Swallowing against a hard tube in her mouth, a baffling hesitation kept her from biting down. She explored the tube with her lips, and the motion tugged on painful cracks at the corners of her mouth, making her wince.

Soft footsteps approached. “Good morning, Harper. You might remember me, I’m Angela.” The woman’s low-toned voice was at once soothing—and her name both familiar and new. “I’m your nurse again, today. We’re getting to know each other pretty well.”

After the disconcerting din, Angela’s lilting chuckle and casual manner took the edge off Harper’s anxiety. She wished she could see her to put a face with the voice. Belatedly, she processed the nurse’s comment. My name is Harper. *Harper Inez*. Recapturing a sliver of herself gave her a tiny sense of relief.

Beeps and whooshes of air kept individual tempos in the unseen space, echoing as though the room needed carpeting. Harper grappled for images to match the soundtrack, and a TV medical series came to mind.

A familiar click near her head signaled a pending surge of air. While she pondered how she could possibly know this, the anticipated breath filled her chest. Finally giving in to temptation, she bit down hard, flattening the malleable tube between her teeth. In answer, a discordant chirp joined the symphony.

Nearby, music with the energetic lyrics of *let’s go broncos* broke out and then abruptly cut off. “Hi, Dr. Hellbusch.” Angela sounded cheerful. “Yes, I got the message

and stopped the Propofol ... She's perking up, so come on down. Oh, by the way, we moved her to room four last night ... See you in a few."

With another mechanical breath, a distracting niggle in Harper's windpipe escalated to a strangling panic. She gagged from deep in her gut, her abs cramping as though she worked a ten-minute plank. A series of excited new chirps echoed in the room.

When she reached for whatever clogged her throat, soft cloth circling her wrists trapped her hands at her sides. Locked in a living nightmare and unable to yell for help, she tugged weakly at her restraints.

"Harper, I'm sorry, sweetie. Your sedation's just wearing off, and you still have that nasty breathing tube." With her unruffled manner, a choking patient might be Angela's routine. "I'm right here, and your oxygen levels are good, I promise."

Her reassurances did nothing to tamp down Harper's panic. The nurse pressed her shoulder back into the mattress with a firm, gentle hand. Then something cool and slender brushed against Harper's arm, stealing her flighty attention. Angela kept her hand steadfastly in place. Within seconds, the suffocating sensation disappeared, and in the very same instant, she relaxed her hold.

"That's better," she murmured, almost to herself. "We're letting you wake up for Dr. Hellbusch's visit. If he thinks the brain swelling is down, we might take you off the ventilator."

Mention of a swollen brain grabbed Harper's unruly focus, and she turned her head toward the nurse.

"You had some bad luck." Angela paused, tugging a sheet back into place. "Someone attacked you, and you're in the New York City General ICU. But don't worry, hun, you're doing great. I know this is a repeat, but I doubt you remember yesterday's chat."

Footsteps too heavy to be Angela's underscored the nurse's voice.

"Oh and here's Ensign," she said. The name rang familiar in a good way, but Harper could not recall anything about him.

"Good morning, Angela." Amid the frightful confusion, the recognizable baritone drew her like a beacon in a stormy night. *Ensign*.

“Excellent timing, Mr. Wells. Harper’s what we call *arousable*—really groggy—but she’s awake enough to be aware of your visit,” Angela said. “And bonus, Dr. Hellbusch is on his way, too.”

Ensign Wells—Harper’s fiancé.

“Hi there, sweet thing. Can you hear me?” he asked. Long slender fingers felt at home in Harper’s hand, and she squeezed back.

“Mr. Wells, pleasant topics are good for Harper. She won’t remember anything, but your voice will ground her in the moment.”

“I understand,” he replied.

A gloved hand rested on Harper’s forehead. “Let’s get this tape off of your lovely peepers, and then we need to do something about those dry lips.”

Angela gingerly removed sticky strips from Harper’s brow and cheeks and then plucked tiny pads from her eyelids. With a tsk-tsk, the nurse smoothed a salve over her chapped lips—petroleum jelly, from the scent. The small comfort made Harper groan in relief, but no sound emerged—only a hiss of air through the tube.

“Even though you’ll be tempted, Mr. Wells, please don’t untie her restraints. Unplanned extubations make me look bad,” Angela warned.

“Okay. Glad you said something.” He chuckled. “Have they mentioned when she might be able to speak with the detectives?”

“Not to me, but we’ll know more after the doctor stops in.” While Angela chatted, she wiped Harper’s face with a warm damp cloth. “That’s better. The protective eye ointment will clear in a few minutes. If you open your eyes, you can get a look at your man.”

Harper blinked against the goo clouding her vision. Tall and blond, Ensign gazed down at her with killer blue eyes. She would marry him in an April wedding. Maybe a giddy bride-to-be feeling would hit her later. Next to him, a plastic bag of clear fluid hung from an IV pole—no three IV poles. Against her will, her lids drooped, shuttering the world.

“Everyone misses you. Your shark agent calls every other day.” His laugh sounded forced. “I told her not to worry. The Argentine Empress of the runway is as beautiful as ever. When your hair grows back, it will hide any scars from the bullet wounds.”

Brain swelling—bullet wounds. She had been shot. However, as with the nurse’s name, this breaking news had an eerie *déjà vu* quality. A distant echo of a gunshot rang in her ears. The elusive memory lacked substance, floating away as crepe paper caught in a breeze.

Ensign caressed her face, and his fingers grazed what had to be stubble on her scalp. They had shaved her trademark long dark locks—right before her wedding. Being bald should fill her with rage or grief, but an odd distance blunted the wound—as though another woman had lost her hair.

“I’m sorry, Harper.” Ensign lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “You’ll get well, and we’ll get married as soon as you’re ready.”

He probably wanted to postpone the wedding until her hair grew back. When she could speak, she would remind him that she knew the best hair gurus in the fashion industry.

“Look at me, sweet thing,” he said.

Unaware she had drifted off again, Harper opened her eyes, unable to truly focus on him.

His brows shot up. “Wow, you really are awake. That’s such a relief after watching you sleep for nearly two weeks.”

With a sluggish mental effort, she counted days. They had missed their wedding. She accepted this realization with a curious indifference. Maybe the drugs had put her emotions to sleep right along with her body.

Ensign leaned down, and his lips brushed the shell of her ear. “Do you remember what happened?”

Waiting for her to respond, the worry filling his gaze intensified. He speared his fingers through his hair. She tried to shake her head.

“I wish I’d caught the bastard, but I had to get you help. You don’t remember a short guy with a ski mask coming in the balcony door?”

Fatigue weighed her down, and she gave the smallest shake of her head. She would get the story later.

Heavy footsteps approached the bed. “Good morning, Miss Inez. I’m Les Hellbusch—your neurosurgeon. Can you open your eyes?”

Harper complied and tried to bring the tall man into focus. Even half-asleep, her internal fashion censor approved of how the black suit set off his silver hair. A nurse in scrubs stood next to him. Angela—maybe.

Ensign rose and the two men exchanged a casual handshake. “Hi, Les. Glad I caught you during your rounds.”

“Yes, convenient.” Almost dismissive, Dr. Hellbusch tapped his phone and studied the display. “Angie, I’ll be out of the OR around three. Could we get Harper’s mother and sister on the phone say—around three-thirty?”

The nurse nodded and moved to a small counter to jot a note. “They were here earlier. I’ll give them a call.”

Harper let her eyes close while they talked over her.

With quick movements, the doctor untied the wrist restraint nearest him, and an instant later, Ensign released her other hand. “Les, the nurse said you might stop the medically induced coma today.”

“Maybe. We’ll see. I’d like to let her wake up. But not until she’s ready.” Hellbusch’s voice filled the room. “Harper, look at me again, please.”

With a monumental effort, she raised her eyelids, and a light flashed in one eye and then the other. He asked her to squeeze his hands and to perform a few other simple tasks. Uncertain she had actually followed his directions, his intense scrutiny troubled her. She pinched her brows together.

“You look so worried.” His smile softened his angular features. “Don’t be. Your facial muscles have normal function. Your left arm and leg are a little weak, but the deficit is minimal. Overall, better than expected.”

She was *deficient*? Wondering why her body parts were lacking, and how that could be better than expected, she sought out Ensign for answers.

He took her hand. “Hear that, Harper? You’re going to be fine.”

With a brief scowl at him, Dr. Hellbusch gave a heavy sigh. “It’s too soon for firm predictions.” He returned his focus to her. “However, I believe you’ll function independently. We’ll talk more about rehab—”

“Can she stay awake today?” Ensign interrupted, sounding almost frantic. “The detectives want to speak with her.”

Naturally, he wanted to track down her attacker, and his worry struck her as sweet. While she wondered what *independent function* meant, her eyes closed again.

“As I said before, we want the brain to rest, so the NYPD will have to wait.” The surgeon sounded mildly irritated. “We’ve kept her asleep so the neural cells can use their energy to heal. There’re no do-overs.”

“Understood,” Ensign replied. On his best days, he had an impatient streak. However, even after the mild rebuke, he had stayed surprisingly pleasant—as though he needed something.

“My concern is that during the few minutes she’s been conscious, the pressure inside her head has increased,” Dr. Hellbusch said. “Enough that we need to restart the Propofol—the sedation.”

“Okay, I’ll let them know,” Ensign replied.

“We’ll check her again in a couple days.”

Harper understood what they said, but with a distinct lack of interest. She was content for others to make any decisions.

Ensign squeezed her hand. “We won’t take any chances with your mind.”

What if she didn’t wake up? Beeps chirped fast above her head, likely synced to her pounding heart. The brief worry flitted away. The next time they woke her, she might remember more. For now, oblivion didn’t sound too bad. Another wave of unnatural fatigue crested over her body.

“Okay. That’s what we’ll do.” Hellbusch’s voice sounded hollow and a million miles away. “Angela, we’ll wake her up again on Wednesday—keep talking to her.”

Angela chuckled. “Talking is my best thing, you know that.”

“Text if you need anything,” he said.

Heavy footsteps faded from the room.

“Mr. Wells, why don’t you tell your girl goodnight? When I restart the drip, she’ll drift off pretty fast.”

Ensign pressed his lips to Harper’s forehead. “I’ll be right here when you wake up. Next time, it will be for good, to come home.”

Home sounded wonderful—maybe. At least it should. A sense of foreboding blossomed into an irrational fear. Her reaction seemed unusual, but she supposed going back into a coma would give anyone the creeps.

Angela pulled an IV pole closer and tapped a keypad on an attached blue box, eliciting more beeps. She squeezed Harper's shoulder. "I think two days will be forever for your fiancé, but for you, it will seem like a minute."

Against her will, Harper's head listed to the side, and her eyelids lowered. The sounds in the room grew louder with an echoing quality, and the fog rolled back in.

Ensign clasped her hand. "I'll stay for a while."

Angela placed ointment in her eyes, one after the other, giving Harper a winking view of the nurse before she taped soft pads over both.

"There we go—peepers all nice and safe." While she spoke, the nurse tucked a pillow behind Harper's back, and ignored aches eased into comfort. "Sir, every time you visit talk to Harper as much as you can, even if you say the same thing over and over."

"I will." Hearing Ensign's voice while she drifted off reassured Harper like nothing else could.

"When you say something, watch her heart rate change on the monitor. I'll be back in a few to check on her." Angela's soft-soled footsteps receded from the ICU suite.

Ensign released Harper's hand, leaving her skin cool without his touch. He paced the room, and she marveled how she could even recognize his footsteps. A moment later, familiar tones sounded near the head of the bed. She must have drifted off. Now, someone adjusted the ventilator.

Odd that she could recognize these beeps amid all the others. Possibly, like now, she'd had other moments of awareness while too sluggish to move. Rollers on the sliding glass door sounded, and the room fell silent—save for the mechanical orchestra that had become her world.

After a moment, she realized Ensign had left, too, and he had not said goodbye. Or maybe he had, and she had already forgotten. Regardless, a sense of abandonment set in, and a miserable tear leaked from the corner of her eye. With her morose frame of mind, she welcomed the blankness of the coma and wondered when the medication would take her away.

A lengthy pause followed the ventilator's click, and the machine pushed in a breath. Pressure built in her chest that had nothing to do with sadness. She tried to force an exhale, but her muscles lacked the needed strength, and the incoming air kept coming. Her ribs resisted the onslaught, and the sharp pain increased, making her think they would crack. Her panic soared.

An unfamiliar tone blared from the ventilator, and its sharp pitch lent it more urgency. An instant later, frantic chimes sounded outside her room.

"I need help in twelve," a woman hollered.

"Jody, with me—Terry, grab the crash cart so we have it." The terse staff voices sounded over pounding footsteps outside the room, and heavy rolling wheels joined the fray.

"Attention-attention ..." A calm, feminine voice came over the intercom. "Rapid response—ICU room twelve." The operator repeated her life-saving announcement in the same retail-recording tone.

Thoughts of her mother and sister ran through Harper's mind, and she thanked God the nurses were coming.

As some of the air left her body, unbelievably, the ventilator clicked again. The pressure built anew, and Harper imagined her lungs as two balloons stretched to translucent. The tension mounted further in her chest, and she wondered if a priest had already given her the last rites.

The clatter beyond her suite faded into the distance. The nurses were not running toward Harper, they were running *away*.

Chapter 1

“Folks, up next is this year’s top winning tie-down roper—Landon Macek. Boy-howdy, does he have a nice lead, too. Let’s give this cowboy a Greeley Stampede welcome.”

In the early evening shadow of the arena grandstand, Landon gripped his piggin’ string between his teeth and cued Rocket into the starting box. He ignored the crowd noise and the hometown announcer Jake, who manned the mic every Fourth of July rodeo. Landon tugged the rope tied to his saddle horn again.

“The bovine babies are winning this go-round. It’d sure be nice if Macek and his superhorse could get a loop on one.”

The crowd applauded. Except for two adolescent girls standing behind the right front rail, holding an animal rights sign between them. The high-school-aged kids held up their poster and booed.

Rocket wouldn’t let a little flapping paper mess with his head, but not all horses had his good sense. Security should pack them out of the arena before someone got hurt.

After turning his mount within the three-sided box, Landon backed into position. He eyed the orange flag hanging from the barrier string that crossed the opening to the arena. Breaking that vertical plane before the calf got its head start would ruin his run with a ten-second penalty.

Rocket’s ears pricked forward like a dog on point, and he snugged his tensed rump into the back corner of the starting box. A black calf shifted inside a metal chute to their left. Landon dipped his chin, signaling the gateman. The chute door banged open, and the little dogie blasted out at lightning speed.

Rocket gathered his hindquarters under him, and at Landon’s nudge, he exploded into the arena. The savvy horse ignored the flailing poster to their right, but the startled baby cow hooked a sharp left. Rocket gamely pivoted after the calf, slipping in the loose

arena dirt. Swinging his loop overhead, Landon planted his weight into his outside stirrup, and as his mount righted himself, he tossed his rope, easily snaring the calf.

In perfect sync, Rocket slid to a stop, and Landon swung to the ground before the horse came to a halt. He sprinted alongside the rope and flanked the roughly two-hundred-pound calf to the ground. The stunned dogie didn't fight as many did. Landon pulled his piggin' string from his teeth, gathered the calf's legs—wrap, wrap, hooley knot—and threw his arms out to his sides, signaling the clock to stop.

Before satisfaction over the run could set in, the rope tied to his saddle dropped slack to the arena floor, wrenching Landon's attention. Belatedly, Rocket took an odd hop backwards, tugging it tight. The horse set his right front hoof on the ground, immediately lifting it again. The go-round forgotten, Landon strode to the big chestnut, mindful not to spook him.

Unflappable Rocket kept the calf in his sights, waiting for his rider to remount. Even injured, the horse stayed on task. An animal like him came along once in a career—if a guy was real lucky. Landon loved him like no other horse he'd ever owned.

With a comforting hand on the gelding's shoulder, he waved for a chute helper to release his calf, disqualifying their ride. He wouldn't get aboard his injured partner to make the run count.

While Landon removed a protective boot from the horse's right front leg, the arena fell silent. He fingered a puffy spot on the back of the leg about an inch below the knee. The gelding flinched, snatching his hoof from the ground.

The bulge expanded while Landon stood by, helplessly. He removed his Stetson to wipe his brow and dropped his head. This was bad.

The PA system shrieked, and Jake cleared his throat into the mic. "Folks, for the safety of all of our stock, as well as our competitors, please refrain from waving objects during the events." Unfortunately, his poignant announcement came too late for Rocket. "I see our on-site veterinarian has left her seat. Some of you might know this horse's story, but while we have a moment ..."

Landon shot a glare at the girls, but security had already escorted them and their sign up the stairs to the exit. He wanted to rage at the pair, but in truth, he was angry with

himself. He could have said something to a rodeo official before his run—or even withdrawn from the event.

“... good roping horses can run into tens of thousands of dollars—even over a hundred. This here cowboy needed a cheap horse that he could make into a champion...” Jake droned on, killing time while Landon examined Rocket’s leg again. The skin stretched tight over the growing lump, making the short hairs stand up at an angle.

The vet couldn’t get there soon enough. Landon loosened the horse’s cinch, signaling to the gelding that his work for the day was done. No stretchers for injured horses. Landon coiled his lariat and then led his wounded teammate at a snail’s pace toward the arena gate.

“... that chestnut pony out there earned Landon over two-hundred thousand dollars so far this year. You do the math. I reckon over half of that is limping out of the arena. Give ol’ Rocket a hand and wish him a speedy recovery.”

Without looking back, Landon acknowledged the crowd’s condolences with a wave of his hat. Rocket would recover—and have a home for life, no matter what. As they entered the alley behind the arena, the gelding’s head bobbed each time he put weight on his injured leg. The possibility of retiring his horse tightened Landon’s throat. Without Rocket, the world championship disappeared. Dreams died hard.

There was still a chance he was wrong. He wasn’t a veterinarian. Maybe the horse had only banged a hind hoof into his cannon bone. That’s why ropers used sport boots in the first place. Maybe the lump was simply a bad, swelled-up bruise. Holding fast to the sliver of hope that he could still make the finals in Vegas, he swallowed his self-pity.

A pint-sized woman in jeans and a girlie cowboy hat rounded the stock pens, and at sight of him, she strode forward to give him a much-needed hug. “I’m so sorry, Landon.” His good buddy’s wife, veterinarian Jessica Lambert, stepped back and scanned a few curious chute helpers keeping their distance. “I’ll get my truck and meet you at Rocket’s stall.”

“Glad you’re here, Doc.” He used her formal title, more or less, grateful fate had made her tonight’s rodeo veterinarian. Since her husband team-roped, she often signed up for a few extra bucks. “Barn C.”

“Yeah, I saw your rig. I won’t be long.” She turned and headed down the aisle with a crisp, no-nonsense stride.

Landon suspected that the woman didn’t weigh a full hundred pounds, yet she’d surprised many with how well she handled the cattle and horses, as well as the cantankerous bulls.

Twilight gave the quiet backyard grounds a lonely feeling, and he took an easy pace between the zipped-up food tents and professional gear booths. Gauging by the uneven cadence of Rocket’s gait, the horse was plenty lame. Tiny muscles over his brown eyes tensed, and he side-eyed the shadows along their path. Rocket’s leg pained him.

“Sorry, buddy. I’d have it be me, if I could,” Landon said, a sense of helplessness eating at him.

As they approached the barn, discordant braying greeted them. Rocket responded with a high-pitched whinny, sounding stressed. Tonight, Landon was especially glad he’d indulged the horse’s need for Buck. The little burro would calm the injured horse in the unfamiliar box stall.

Landon paused at his trailer and stripped Rocket down to a halter before leading him into the stable. Buck’s vocals increased until the stall door opened and the inseparable pasture pals could rub noses. The big gelding’s chest rumbled with a murmured nicker. Happy to see his friend, the burro swished his tail up and down or sideways with each quiet squeak from his throat.

Landon rubbed one long velvety ear and kissed it. Rocket wasn’t the only one in need of a friend.

“Landon?” Jess’s voice carried down the corridor between the stalls.

Anxious about his horse’s injury, Landon stepped out into the concrete alley and waved. “Down here.”

The little bit of woman had an equipment bag slung over one shoulder and toted a white five-gallon bucket that made her tilt to the side. He rushed to take the heavy pail, noting the crushed ice inside. “I got this. Thanks for coming.”

She set her duffle on the edge of the concrete aisle before treading into the stall’s sawdust bedding. The quarter horse ignored her, tugging alfalfa from a metal hayrack on

the wall while the more inquisitive Buck nuzzled her pockets. He was accustomed to treats from strangers.

Scratching both of his ears, she smiled. “*You’re* the little guy I hear so much about. This is a serious visit, but I’ll bring something special tomorrow.”

Though eager for the vet’s diagnosis, Landon had to observe some social pleasantries. “This is Rocket’s roomie, Buck.”

The vet gave him a wry smile. “Colt says the other calf ropers plot to burro-nap him. You know, to throw Rocket off his game.”

Her husband had told Landon the same. With his horse on the injured reserve list, Landon’s laugh was bittersweet. “Yeah, they’d threatened a couple times. Lookin’ like they don’t need to bother.”

“At least for now.” Jess gestured to the munching horse. “I need to see him move.”

Pulling the animal from his dinner, Landon clipped a lead rope to his halter. Rocket’s hooves clopped along the cement as Landon led him past a few stalls and returned to stop in front of her. She ran her fingers down both of the horse’s forelegs before focusing on the injury. “All because of a couple ding-dong teenagers.”

Furious all over again, Landon puffed a breath through pursed lips. “Yep. I’ve got a few things to say to those girls, but they’re too young to hear them.”

During the exam, Buck poked his nose out over the top board of the stall, making quiet braying noises. Landon marveled at how animals sensed anxiety. He swore that the little donkey had told Rocket it would be okay.

Jess picked up the horse’s right front hoof, bending his knee, and then pressed fingers over his lower leg again. The horse flinched and tugged against her hold.

Releasing him with a pat on his shoulder, her grim expression put a rock in the pit of Landon’s stomach.

“He’s bowed a tendon—at least I’m pretty sure. We need an ultrasound to know exactly what we’re dealing with,” Jess told him with all kinds of sympathy in her tone.

Not a bruise. At sight of the swollen lump, Landon had feared as much, but the official diagnosis didn’t go down any easier. Even without a break in the skin, he had almost convinced himself that Rocket had clipped his leg when he’d stumbled.

Returning Rocket to the box stall, he swallowed, trying to find his voice. “What’s next?”

She followed him in, dropping her bag in the corner, and waved at the bucket next to it. “Tonight—ice. Then at least two weeks of *strict* stall rest.”

Absorbing the news, Landon tangled his fingers into his horse’s coarse mane, working hard to keep his composure. “I’ve heard they can recover pretty good from bowed tendons. How long?”

Pulling an icepack leg wrap from her duffle, she hesitated. “Not in time for this year. Six to nine months, maybe? I’m sorry.”

The news got better and better. He nodded.

Jess scooped ice into pockets of the wrap and then applied it to Rocket’s injured leg with Velcro tabs. “Do you have another mount?”

Landon snorted. “Back home in California—not much help, even if he was here. Bandit’s a solid horse, but he’s not athletic enough for the big leagues.” He draped an arm over Rocket’s withers. “This boy gave me my shot. He’s the key.”

“I still can’t believe you claimed him at the racetrack.”

“Yeah.” Chuckling, Landon recalled his late nights with his laptop. “I bet I watched over a hundred races to find him, too.”

“What caught your eye?”

“Price—I needed cheap. Rocket had never even taken the show spot in a race. He stunk up the track.”

The vet tried to smother her guffaw with a hand. “Oh, that’s terrible.”

Recalling videos of Rocket, he warmed to his subject. “Yeah, it was. But no one beat him out of the gate. He’d blast off, and after four or five strides, he’d slow down and find a comfy spot near the back of the pack.”

She nodded. “You only need a few strides to catch a calf.”

“That’s right. But I think he needed a better reason to run. Plus, he’s got a little working cow horse on his daddy’s side. After he figured out we were catching calves, when I missed one, he’d get mad and shake his head to let me know.”

“Colt says the best roping horses are like that.” She placed a hand on Landon’s forearm. “He can be that horse again. Let me make some calls in the morning. *Someone* in Greeley has an ultrasound.”

“Okay. You mentioned stall rest. What about trailering him to California?”

As though he’d asked to jump the horse off a cliff, Jess shook her head, swinging her ponytail. “No way.” She tapped a finger on her lips. “It’s pricey, but you could fly him home.”

“Oh, man. That’d be thousands. Plus, I don’t think we could catch a flight tomorrow.” Landon shook his head. “I’ve got to have him out of the barn before noon. What about a few hours to Spencer? I planned to stop at a friend’s for a couple days before Cheyenne.”

“Maybe. Let’s see what the ultrasound shows before you make any plans.”

Landon’s mind raced, worrying about Rocket and trying to think of a way to get back on the circuit. He had a big lead on the second place roper, Bart Jenkins. A couple missed rodeos wouldn’t knock him out of the running.

* * *

The next morning, Landon stirred cream into his coffee, seated at a booth in a familiar greasy spoon. The food was good, if not healthy, and a short walk to a cheap hotel near the rodeo grounds kept the place in business. Red-padded chrome chairs and Formica tables gave the cafe a fifties feel. Other contestants, mostly men and a couple gals made up the dozen or so customers.

“The number two, please. Over-easy. Bacon,” he said and handed his menu to a gum-chewing waitress. The slight motion made his booth creak. Dolly, according to her nametag, appeared a few years past his twenty-nine.

She tucked the laminated sheet under her arm. “We love when the Stampede comes to town.” She perused the few cowboys scattered in the dining area before focusing on him, a smile curving her lips. “Nothing like a man in a Stetson.”

Other than polite nods, Landon hadn’t engaged anyone—he was still in a mood over Rocket and their lost championship. No buckle-bunny would draw his attention. He offered a manufactured smile. “A few of them are single.”

The woman's flirtatious grin evaporated. "I'll get your order in."

She marched off with her ponytail swaying. He hadn't lied outright, he'd only misled her into thinking he was hitched. One-night-stands were not his thing, but she'd find someone interested.

Jenkins across the way had a few women strung along the circuit and would likely be glad to add another. As though the other calf roper felt Landon's eyes on him, he lifted his chin in greeting. Landon nodded in return.

While he waited for breakfast, he snatched an abandoned newspaper from the table next to him. Wanting to find out who'd won last night, he thumbed for the sports section, and a photo of Harper Inez above the fold caught his eye. The Argentine Empress was the hottest thing in print. Maybe they'd made an arrest in her home invasion shooting.

The *Fiancé's Story Questioned* title hinted at the same speculation they'd put out for weeks. Not much substance in the article—lots of "no comments on an active investigation" peppered the text. Inez's publicist confirmed the couple had separated—unrelated to the shooting, of course. However, the fiancé Ensign Wells had retained a criminal attorney, and that said something. Who could look into those gorgeous obsidian eyes and pull a trigger?

According to the paper, detectives had interviewed her shortly before she left the hospital a few weeks prior. Landon had followed her career for several years now, and the news she'd been discharged relieved him. It was funny how a person could care about a celebrity—a complete stranger.

Earlier gossip rags—his guilty pleasure—had reported that she wanted to branch out into acting. He'd hoped to see her on the big screen one day. Now, they speculated about possible enemies, lengthy rehab, and if she'd ever work again.

He thought Rocket's injury was a bad break. At least no one had tried to kill him. The biggest crime he had to worry about was a burro-napping. Maybe he should quit sulking over his lost shot at the finals.

Two pairs of brown cowboy boots appeared in Landon's peripheral vision. He'd been so engrossed in the article; he hadn't heard the men approach.

His good friend and team-roper Colt Lambert touched the rim of his brown leather hat. "Mornin'."

He sipped from a large to-go coffee. Standing next to Colt, the taller, gregarious redhead Bart Jenkins extended a hand. “You had me beat last night, Macek. I’m sure sorry about Rocket. Winning that way felt pretty lame.”

Laying the paper down, Landon rose and shook hands with both men. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

He retook his seat, waving an invitation for them to join him.

“I’ve got to get on the road, but thanks.” Jenkins shifted his weight, clearly uncomfortable about something. “Look, Macek, winnin’ won’t mean much without you in the lineup. You’re welcome to use my extra mare at Laramie. She’s no Rocket, but she’s respectable.”

With a glance at Jenkins, Colt raised a brow.

Surprised to his bones by his number-one competitor, Landon tried to gauge Jenkins’s sincerity. Regardless, he did not intend to take help from his main rival. “She’s a good girl. I’ve seen her work. That’s mighty generous, Bart. To be honest, I have to take care of my horse before I worry about the next rodeo. I’m going to meet Doc Jess after breakfast.”

Jenkins nodded. “Just say the word.” As though searching for a new focus, he tapped a finger on Harper Inez’s image. “What idiot would shoot a prime bit o’ filly like that? What a dirt bag.”

Landon had to agree. Her spread in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition had been a knockout. However, her bottomless dark eyes had captured his attention long before her lithe figure. “I haven’t read the whole thing, but it didn’t sound like they’ve got much on him.”

Jenkins snorted. “It’s always the husband or boyfriend, you know that.”

Breakfast arrived, and while an ambitious Dolly chatted up Jenkins, she nearly overfilled Landon’s chipped mug.

Unusually quiet during the encounter, jabber-mouth Colt sent Landon a furtive grin. “Well, I’m headed out. Landon, Jess said Rocket’s her first stop this morning. I hope to see you in Laramie. Bart, you too—if’n you can tear yourself away.”

Jenkins gave Colt a nod. “I’ll be right behind you.” Beaming at Dolly, he held out his phone. “Darlin’, before I leave, would you tap that little number of yours right here?”

That's how it's done. Jenkin's gaze flitted to her nametag before he saved the contact. Landon pressed his lips together against a laugh. The other roper strode out, and Dolly seemed to recall she had an order up. Landon's toast was cold, but the other parts of the meal had survived the wait.

The rest of the Inez article didn't have any new information and he flipped to the sports section. The locals always made sure to give the rodeo good press. He and Rocket got a heartbreak mention in the corner with a shot of them leaving the arena.

Colt slid into the opposite booth, surprising him. "Hey, Landon."

"Thought you left. What's up?"

Setting his hat on the bench next to him, he apparently planned to stay for a few minutes. He speared fingers through his wavy brown hair. "I didn't want to say anything in front of Bart, but do you remember ol' Davey Bingham?"

"Sure. Tie-down champ four, no five, years back? He's retired, right?"

"Yeah, for a while now." One corner of Colt's mouth lifted, and he leaned in as though sharing national secrets. "A few weeks ago, he gave a ropin' clinic in Sioux Falls, and I helped with the team ropers. Anyway, he asked me to keep an eye out for a buyer for his horse, Opie."

Landon remembered the plain-Jane sorrel gelding. His heart rate sped up before his brain kicked in. He snorted. "And you think I can afford a ready-made world-champion roping horse?"

"At least you know Opie can get the job done." Colt's grin signaled an incoming jibe. "You could always take Blowhard Bart up on his offer—use *his* mare to limp in to Vegas."

"Did I miss the pig flying overhead?" Landon deadpanned.

His friend barked a laugh and then rested his elbows on the table, growing serious. "Truth is, you know guys on the circuit help each other. Any one of us could have a lame horse tomorrow. Plus, I think Jenkins was dead serious. Just surprised the hell out of me."

"Yeah, me, too. But I can't help it—winning with a handout from that guy takes the shine right off the trophy buckle."

Colt frowned. "You ever heard the sayin' *pride goeth before a fall*?"

Landon wanted to win with the horse he'd trained—Rocket. That way, no one could say someone gave him the championship, or that he had bought his way into it with someone else's horse. A pure win.

On the other hand, Landon had a clear lead. No one walked away from a world championship. "I'll think about it. Did he say how much he wanted for him?"

"He wouldn't tell me, so don't expect a bargain. At least start out trying to buy the horse. He's twelve now, and I reckon he's been eating grass for a few years." Colt shrugged. "But I was thinkin', maybe you could work a lease. Beings you're on track to win the world and all, Bingham might go for somethin' short term. People do stuff like that all the time."

Others did. Landon had never warmed to the idea of being responsible for someone else's animal—especially a high-dollar one. What happened if Opie got sick or hurt? *Like a bowed tendon.*

Still, he admitted the notion had possibilities. "I could offer to tune the horse up and get him out in front of folks. That way, a real buyer could fall in love with him."

A toothy grin split Colt's face. "Now, your grit's showin'. Keep on thinking that a-way. You'll get yourself a big-ass ol' gold buckle for Christmas."

If he brokered a horse sale, he could land a fat commission, but a lease wouldn't earn him a dime. By mentioning the lease deal, he might've given up around ten thousand dollars. Friends like that were hard to come by.

Landon reached out with a fist bump. "Thanks buddy. I appreciate the lead."

This could work. He only needed a temporary mount through December. Besides getting him to the finals, having a horse in the fall would give him a good start on the new regular season beginning in October. If he did well at the National Finals Rodeo in Vegas, he might even buy Opie. A text pinged Landon's cell.

Colt pointed his phone at the sound. "That's Bingham's contact info. Let me know how it goes."

After draining his coffee, Landon tossed enough cash on the table to pay for breakfast and maybe buy Dolly's forgiveness for his lack of interest. They strode out to the tiny parking lot, and the morning sun glinted off the hood of Landon's Ram 3500.

The mountain air was still cool but before long, the July heat would take the day. The two men parted ways, and Landon drove to the rodeo grounds to meet Colt's wife.

Rigs leaving the lot for the next stop on the circuit gave him a pang. He should be loaded and gone right along with them.

Jess was waiting for him in Rocket's stall, feeding carrots to Buck. "Good morning."

"Back at you. You're early."

She joined him in the ally and latched the stall door behind her. "The leg's a little more swollen. Rocket's icing now. I spoke with a Greeley vet a few minutes ago—Halverson. He can do an ultrasound, but he doesn't have room for an overnight patient. He recommended a new place a few hours from here."

A greenhorn vet wouldn't do, not for Rocket. Landon frowned. "I—"

Jess shoved a ripped scrap of paper at him and smiled, seeming to guess his concern. "He said the place is new, but the guy is an experienced equine specialist—and that's what you need. If you're going with him, I'll make the referral."

"Okay... what about the ultrasound?" Landon hadn't slept a wink worrying about his horse. With the increased swelling, maybe Rocket had hurt his leg worse than Jess thought.

"Halverson was willing. But since you have to travel anyway, he recommended that the specialist do the study—then the images will give him the current status of the injury."

Landon released an uneasy breath. "In other words, in case Rocket's leg gets worse during the ride."

"Yep. There's no way to sugar coat it." She checked her phone and then quickly handed him a few bandage rolls from her duffle. "I'm sorry, but one of the broncs got spooked and cut himself when they were loading. Use those instead of a shipping boot on that leg. Standard wrap."

They said a quick goodbye, and she left Landon alone in the aisle with two curious equine noses poking out through the rails. He dumped oats in their feed bins, making his critters very happy. With ten minutes to kill before removing the icepack, Landon dialed his friend, Ryder Barlow.

A couple years back, the Hollywood master of horse had hired Landon as a consultant for a cattle-drive scene. They'd hit it off pretty good and kept in touch even after the horse trainer had returned home to Spencer, Colorado.

The call connected. "Hi, Landon. You getting close?"

The sound of a familiar voice made Landon smile. "Not yet. I'm leaving Greeley in about thirty. I ran into some bad luck yesterday ..."

After he'd updated his friend, proud of his matter-of-fact tone, Landon sighed. "Before I call this guy ..." He unfolded the scrap of paper. Same name as the town—an odd coincidence. "Jackson Spencer, do you know anything about him?"

Ryder chuckled with a sudden lack of sympathy, confusing Landon. "Yeah, I do. He's my cousin—and my business partner. Damn good vet, too."

Relieved by the recommendation, Landon put the phone on speaker to remove Rocket's ice pack. "Wait—partner? You *own* the vet hospital?"

"You don't have that much time, but relax." He could hear the smile in Ryder's voice. "I've got your back. Whatever you need, buddy. We'll figure this out. Step one—get here."

"Thanks, man. I owe you."

Having one decision made gave Landon a mental boost. After tethering Rocket outside to dry off in the warm sun, Landon loaded his equipment into the tack compartment of his gooseneck horse trailer. The sun was rising and so was the temperature. He opened two of his truck's four doors and took a seat before calling the vet. Eleven a.m. He'd make the exit deadline.

"Jackson here."

Expecting a receptionist or answering service, Landon double-checked the number. "Uh, yeah, Doctor Spencer?"

"Set it right there ... Yes, please ... Thanks." The man on the line cleared his throat. "That's me. Jackson Spencer. Sorry about that, a delivery just arrived. How can I help you?"

Landon introduced himself.

"Oh, you're Doctor Lambert's referral. It sounds like Rocket's injury is more heartbreaking than most. I'm sorry."

“That’s rodeo. But thanks. Do you think you can help him?”

“Yes, and we’ll do everything we can to get him back to his previous level of function.” The vet paused, and the *no guarantees* part of his statement sunk in. “Our place is very new. In fact, we’re still adding hardware to the stalls, but we have any equipment he’ll need—underwater treadmill for one. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Doctor Spencer listened mostly in silence, interjecting a question here and there for details.

Landon got the sense he truly cared about Rocket’s future. “Besides stall rest, what happens after the ultrasound?”

“We won’t know for certain until we get the images, but from the level of swelling you describe, he could need surgery to remove excess fluid from the injury site.”

Jess hadn’t mentioned surgery. The only thing he knew about horses and anesthesia was to avoid it at all costs. Horses didn’t tolerate going to sleep like other animals.

Landon had trouble finding his voice. “Uh... I’d rather not.”

“I understand. Surgical intervention is always a last resort. We’ll table that until we know more.” Jackson quickly changed the subject, offering his address for GPS navigation. “I submitted our location a couple weeks ago, so it should be in their system.”

Still distracted by the possibility of surgery, Landon numbly entered the info into his phone. “Got it.”

Things had gone from bad to worse. The perceptive vet had even picked up on his apprehension—like a damned burro. Rocket was a horse, not Landon’s kid. He needed to get a grip.

“Drive real slow, especially on the mountain switchbacks,” Jackson said. “Call me when you’re a few miles out, and I’ll meet you here.”

“Will do. Thanks, doc.” Landon disconnected and rested back against the seat. A sawdust scented breeze coursed through the cab. Two rigs drove past and the drivers waved. *Surgery.*

[END OF EXCERPT]

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