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# CASH

Rodeo Roughies - Book Three

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Patricia Green  
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vi

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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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**T**he chord progression was tough, but Sharon worked at it until it flowed smoothly from one bar to the next. She hummed along with it, engrossed in the work she loved. The day had gone well. She'd made quite a bit of progress, but it was far from done.

The song she was writing was strong, determined, even aggressive. She thought maybe she ought to make the lyrics patriotic and enthusiastic. But the lyrics would come later. She had yet to finish the melody. Other songwriters approached their music differently, but writing the music first was the way she learned to do it years ago and it suited her.

As she made notes on the sheet music she was writing, the front door lock clicked open and the door swung wide. Her roommate and good friend, Riley Patterson, wafted in, perfume first, dancing on her tiptoes and singing a nameless tune in her high, lilting voice. Her voice made Riley lots of money, so she used it whenever she could. She pirouetted and tiptoed gracefully, spinning, sending her long auburn hair helicoptering out from her head. The bright yellow and green pattern on her flirty dress blurred as she danced.

Sharon smiled as she watched, her own long, dark blonde hair tied up in a ponytail to prevent it from draping down over her guitar while she wrote. Riley was a person of enthusiasms and she tended to go crazy for one thing or another, then rapidly lose interest. She was flighty but had a heart of gold. Still, Sharon had to ask. "What's got you all het up?"

"Oh, can't you tell, Sharon? I'm in love! Love, love, love. I'm mad, crazy, loony about this guy!" Tossing her purse onto a plush olive-green club chair, she sighed and hummed with delight.

Sharon wanted to roll her eyes, but she opted for politeness. "Oh? Who is he?"

"He's a rodeo something-or-other. His name is Cash. Isn't it the cutest name ever? It sounds like he'd be a good luck charm. He's so fantastic, I just can't get enough."

Sharon smiled and strummed a few chords. "Is he Cash Richey?"

"Could there be another cowboy named 'Cash'?"

"Unlikely. I've seen him but haven't spoken to him. Tall, a little scruffy, gorgeous smile, right?"

"That's him. Oh, Sharon, when he smiles at me, I think I might faint." She flopped with a whoosh onto the other, matching chair in the room, across from Sharon, who sat with her guitar balanced on her jeans on the brown and gold patterned sofa.

Riley was on one of her trips into fantasy-ville. She was so often 'in love', it was a cycle of wild enthusiasm followed by deep disappointment when the guy she was crushing on let her down somehow. She broke up with lovers as often as Sharon put on her shoes. Sharon was exactly the opposite. She was too busy to start relationships. Her music meant more than a passing fancy, even though, every once in a while, she felt a little lonely and yearned for the company of a man she could love. It was stupid, though. She didn't want to fall in and out of love like Riley.

"Riley, keep a level head, okay? You remember Harry, don't

you? You were crazy about him, too, and he was quite a dirt bag. It wasn't the first time, either."

Riley stopped smiling and began to fuss with the buttons on her dress. "I know, I know. I haven't always had great taste in men. But those guys were wrong for me. We had too much in common. They didn't excite me like Cash does."

Too much in common... Like being flighty and slightly pressed off center? Yes, they were those things, but also, they weren't as interested in Riley as she had been in them. She'd thrown her all into each relationship and got very little in return. She just couldn't admit to herself she'd set herself up to be used and discarded. Sharon tried to tell her, or at least mitigate the damage when her friend wouldn't listen to reason.

"Where did you meet him? At the arena?"

"Yes. I was looking for you. He stopped to help me. He's just the most kind, generous person ever!"

Sharon paused her random chord progressions, watching the sheer white curtains billow slightly on the warm afternoon breeze. "Gentlemanly of him. What did you need from me that couldn't wait until tonight?"

"Maggie has a cold and laryngitis. Can you be a backup singer tonight at a show?"

"What time?"

"Nine o'clock. Say you'll do it. Please?"

"Where is it?"

"Guenther's."

"Another wedding?"

Riley scrunched up her face. "I know. I know. But I could use the money, and those gigs pay really well. There's no shame in doing private engagements."

"No, of course not." Sharon could use the money, too. Doing rodeos paid the bills for the most part, but it didn't get her ahead. If she wanted to devote more time to songwriting rather than performing, she needed to have a nest egg.

It would be a race to get from the arena where she had an eight o'clock show, all the way to Guenther's across town. It was a popular venue for parties, including wedding receptions, bar mitzvahs, and small business conferences. It had a beautiful view of the San Antonio River Walk, which drew people from all over Texas and beyond. Their food was excellent, the tables always glittered with fine china, and the liquor was plentiful. For Sharon, the money was too good to pass up. "Sure, I'll do it. Tell Maggie I hope she gets better soon. Is there a rehearsal?"

"No. We're playing the usual mix, including "Mocha". Nothing you haven't done with us before."

"Mocha" was a song Sharon had written for Riley a couple of years past. Riley had ridden it into the top forty but hadn't been able to capitalize on it as much as she should have. Her agent hadn't been aggressive enough, but he'd been replaced since then and Riley's gigs were getting more frequent and high-profile. Sharon was proud of "Mocha" but, like Riley, it hadn't gotten her as far as it might have. Sharon's agent did get her a few songwriting gigs for novice country singers on the back of the song, but she needed more than one top forty in order to make a name for herself in the music industry.

Riley got up, patted Sharon on her bare arm wrapped around the guitar and giggled. "You're good to me. Thank you."

Sharon returned Riley's warm expression. "You're welcome."

"La la la! I'm about as happy as happy can be. I love being in love! Cash and I are going to be perfect for each other, don't you think?"

Yes, Riley loved being in love. Good thing, too, as she did it so often. "I don't know Cash except to point him out in a crowd. I'm sure the right man will come along for you sooner or later, Riley. Maybe he's the one. I couldn't say."

"Wait until you meet him! Then you'll know for sure like I do."

"Okay. Until then, let me get back to this song. I'd like to get the refrain started today."

"Of course. I'm going to go look him up on the internet. It doesn't hurt to be careful."

"Right. Have fun." At least her friend had the common sense to look for any red flags. Sharon would have probably heard gossip about any cowboy who was particularly troublesome, but she really didn't get involved in squabbles, so she might have missed something. The cowboys didn't much interest her. They were too testosterone-driven, dangerous to her peace of mind. She was safer with her guitar.

As Riley danced out of the room, humming a popular love song, Sharon rolled her eyes and got back to her work.

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The gig at Guenther's had gone very well. Not only had Sharon gotten a share of the band's pay for the night, but the best man handed out envelopes of cash to individual band members. It was generous and made a big difference to Sharon's bottom line. And Guenther's was such a lovely place to work. Everything was organized and ran smoothly and on time. Candles twinkled on the tables decorated with fragrant flower arrangements. The place catered to successful people. It showed in every detail.

Her meeting with the rodeo paymaster late the next morning had been fruitful, too, and Sharon was in a very good mood as she walked toward the barn from the back of the offices. She heard Riley's voice call to her and turned to look.

Riley was standing next to Cash Richey with a big smile on her face. She wore a low-cut blue dress and completely inappropriate black, strappy, sandals. Cash smiled, but the smile didn't reach his amazing eyes – eyes the color of Tupelo honey. Riley waved her over and Sharon walked across to them, avoiding getting any fresh manure on her gray cowboy boots. She tried to

judge their relationship by Cash's body posture. It didn't look promising.

He stood there with a specialized saddle in his hands, seemingly ready to haul it somewhere, but Riley had him cornered. The sleeves of his brown, checked shirt were rolled up, exposing strong, tanned forearms, with slightly bunched muscles as he held the saddle.

What was Riley doing at the barn anyway? She hated the "smelly, dirty" arena. Two days in a row meant something was up. Sharon wondered what excuse her friend had given the cowboy for being at the arena twice in two days.

"So, there you are. I wanted you to come rehearse with us this afternoon. Maggie is still out and we're playing Howl tonight."

"Oh, well..."

"You know you need the work," Riley said. Sharon found it somewhat embarrassing said in front of a stranger like Cash. It made her seem rather pitiful and needy. She was neither. Riley hadn't meant to be insulting. She was trying to make herself seem a little more important, was all. She wanted to look good in front of her prospective beau. Sharon didn't hold it against her. "Do you have something better to do?" Another zing. If Riley hadn't been her friend since second grade, Sharon would have been tempted to say something scathing, but she held back.

"I'm working on a song, you know."

Riley waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, that. Can't it wait?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause, until Cash put the saddle down, bringing the attention back to himself. He held out his hand to Sharon.

"I'm Amon Richey. They call me 'Cash'."

As they touched hands, there was an electric spark and both quickly pulled away. "Ouch!" Sharon wasn't really hurt, but it had been a surprise. She smiled to signal she was okay. Cash smiled back.



"Must be the high winds outside. They always electrify things."

"Probably. I'm Sharon Harriman."

Another long pause, then both Sharon and Cash spoke at once. "I've seen you around," they chorused.

Laughing, they shared the moment. "You first," he told her.

"Oh. Just saying, I've seen you around the arena. Saddle bronc, right?"

"Yep. Sissy stuff."

Sharon snorted. "Not hardly."

"You're brave and courageous," Riley said, sliding herself into the conversation again, her smile and calf eyes for Cash alone.

Cash looked a little embarrassed.

"Aren't you high in the standings?" Sharon asked. "First or second, I think. Come on, own it."

"Well, it's first this week. Could be fifth next. You never know until it's over."

"Ahem," Riley inserted. "Cash was just telling me about his workout regimen."

"I don't really do anything the other guys don't do. We're all athletes. Working out is just part of the job."

"What you described sounded grueling," Riley put her hand on his arm.

"Not really. Anyway, I ought to be going." He tipped his hat and bent to pick up his saddle, neatly dislodging Riley's hand.

"Must you?" Riley asked.

"I'm sure Cash has to prepare for tonight's rodeo," Sharon said, trying to make the cowboy a little more comfortable. It was obvious he wanted to get away.

"That's right," he told them. "I have to check my saddle and such. Have a good afternoon, ladies." He smiled and heat shot through Sharon like the earlier electric spark.

Riley pouted and sighed her good-bye.

Sharon was a little more conversational with hers.

After he'd walked away, Riley took Sharon to task. "Why did you have to scare him away? You had to know he'd find it embarrassing to be reminded he's number one with the broncs. What was he supposed to say? He's not the kind of guy who boasts, you know. He was just about to ask me out, too."

"Well, he is at the top of the standings, Riley. The point was to let him know he's special for accomplishing it."

"I should be the one to make him feel special, Sharon."

"Then maybe you should try harder. Like pay attention to the things which must be important to him."

"But I hate rodeo!"

Sharon sighed. "He's a cowboy, Riley. He's a rodeo champion. That's not going to go away anytime soon. If you want this relationship to work, it has to be two-sided. You can't expect him to know how special you are if you don't acknowledge how special he is." Oh, the irony of a person who avoided romantic relationships, giving someone who couldn't get enough romantic relationships, relationship advice. She nearly snorted at the thought.

Riley deflated, her shoulders drooping. "I'm not good at relationships."

Patting her friend's arm, Sharon tried to be sympathetic. "No one is particularly good at relationships, hon. We all just muddle through, trying to be kind and considerate."

"Right." They started to wend their way toward the exit around the chutes in the barn. "Lunch? We have about an hour before the rehearsal. You will do the backup tonight, won't you?"

"Where is it? And what time?"

"Howl at nine-thirty."

Howl wasn't as far away as Guenther's, and nine-thirty was much easier for Sharon to manage. "Sure," Sharon agreed. "I'll meet you at Mimi's Café for our lunch."

Later, as they sat in their favorite lunch spot, munching on their small plates of appetizers, casually placed on the outdoor, white iron filigree tables, Riley took up the topic of Cash again.

"Did you know," she began, "Cash comes from North Dakota, just like we do?"

"A lot of saddle bronc riders come from North Dakota. North Dakota is a hotbed of bronc riding."

"I know that, silly. I just think it's cool he's from Mercer County. Apparently, his family farms corn there—"

"Everyone farms corn in Mercer."

"Ah-ha. But Cash's family is special. They grow heirloom corn for seed. They sell it to different seed distributors in the US."

Sharon finished her calamari and sipped at her fizzy drink.

Riley persisted. "Isn't it fascinating?"

"Um... Sure." It did intrigue Sharon that a corn farmer's son would end up being a professional saddle bronc rider, but it was popular where they came from so maybe it wasn't so odd.

Sharon thought they'd left North Dakota behind when she and Riley moved to Los Angeles to make their way in the music business. But she'd missed her family, and LA hadn't been a good place for either of them. The music business there was cutthroat and often talent meant a lot less than connections. Thinking the Texas music business around Austin might be better for them, she and Riley moved to San Antonio, a short distance from the big music scene in Austin. Things were working out much better for them there.

The ties to North Dakota were still strong though, and if this thing between Riley and Cash worked out, they'd be even stronger.

Life took some funny turns sometimes.

Riley popped away from a forkful of chicken salad and wiped her lips with a napkin. "Oh! I almost forgot to tell you."

"What?"

"There was a music aficionado at the wedding yesterday, and he absolutely gushed about "Mocha". I told him you'd written it and he said he has a friend who knows Mandy C. He wanted to pass your name along to Mandy with the idea that she might hire you to do something as popular."

"*The Mandy C?*"

Riley nodded, excitement on her face.

"Did you give him my number?"

"I did. And he gave me his card." She bent and rummaged in her purse. "Here it is. 'Gavin Rice'."

She handed over the card and Sharon set her denim blue gaze on it. It was a simple card with a nice, gold foil logo and the company name under 'Gavin Rice, CEO'. "Thanks!"

"You're welcome. He was very enthusiastic. I'll bet he calls."

A friend of a friend was kind of sketchy, but Sharon would cautiously work with him if he called. The first thing she needed to do was contact her agent about it. Elliott would be very keen to know what transpired.

After the rehearsal, there was the rodeo to prepare for. The small band she sang and played with was a friendly bunch, thrown together in bits and pieces just for the purpose of playing rodeos. Elliott had arranged their group and promoted them until they were getting steady gigs. Sometimes, there were a few weeks between rodeos, and there was lots of travel involved, but Sharon liked the people she worked with. The venues were always so wholesome. God, patriotism, and family all unabashedly worshipped among the spectators and participants. When Sharon worked at Riley's venues as a backup singer, she was often put off by the sleazy people who organized the shows, and the patrons who were often seriously drunk and rude. But, as a pop singer, Riley had to work such

places, and her growing fan base suggested she was doing the right things.

The crowd at the rodeo was stomping and clapping after the musical entertainment she and her band provided. It felt good to make so many people happy just by doing the things she loved. They played one of her songs, too: "Witness". It was about a woman who witnessed her boyfriend come on to other girls. The woman kicked him to the curb and found another guy who treated her as she deserved. It was too snarky to submit to A-list country stars, but it was great at the rodeo where up-tempo country music about strong women was so appropriate.

Sharon had time between the show and leaving for Howl, so she stood beneath the bleachers on a small step and watched the rodeo in progress. The saddle broncs were up next and, try as she might to be disinterested and disengaged, Sharon was eager to watch Cash and cheer a little. She "knew him" now and it was okay to root for him, even though he was Riley's crush.

He was up for the challenge at fifth spot in the go-round. The high score so far was eighty-three out of one hundred. Sharon thought it was more because the horse wasn't as exciting as some of the broncs, and since the horse's score was half of the rider's overall score, it mattered if you got a good draw or not.

Cash's draw was My Uncle Bob. She heard the buzz from the men behind her as they watched on a big screen in the area between the barn and the bleachers. Apparently, My Uncle Bob was a scoundrel of a horse. But someone-or-other had managed to get eighty-five points out of him one night, so it could be done.

Cash had some trouble with his saddle being loose, but they got it straightened out and he wrapped his fingers through the thick, gray and green saddle bronc rein and mounted the twitchy animal. Within seconds he was set and nodding at the gatekeepers.

The horse leapt out of the chute like a startled gazelle and

bucked and kicked like a mad thing. Cash marked the horse correctly, holding his dull spurs over the horse's shoulders carefully, then pulling them back and forth with each jump of the beast. The horse was having a fine old time, letting loose all the energy he'd pent up in the barn all day. Cash rode him like a graceful surfer on a cresting wave. When the eight-second buzzer sounded, Cash jumped off the horse's back and picked up his hat, making his way toward the judges as the crowd cheered his excellent ride.

The score came in: eighty-six points! Sharon hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath while the judges did their tally, but she let it out with a happy whoosh. Cash disappeared back behind the chutes, and Sharon watched the end of the go-round, hoping no one would get a higher score than Cash. Then she thought maybe she ought to head off to her second gig for the night.

As she backed off the step, she ran into something and would have tumbled off backwards, but a pair of strong hands grabbed her by the elbows and steadied her.

"Whoa, ma'am. Careful there."

She turned, startled. "Oh! Oh, it's you, Cash."

"Yup. Just me. You nearly fell on your keister."

She laughed. "Thanks to you I didn't. You look happy. I'm glad you won."

"Thank you, Sharon," he said, tipping his hat. "I appreciate your encouragement."

"It was fun watching you work."

"It was fun doing my job."

"I could tell you were having a good time. Must be nice."

"It works for me. Do you like making music?"

"I love it. Can't imagine doing anything else, though my parents wanted me to be a nurse."

He laughed. "You'd have made a cute nurse. I'd have let you take my blood pressure for sure."

It was her turn to laugh. "Thank you."

"Are you free for a drink now? The show will be over in a few minutes anyway. Unless you want to watch the break-away roping or something."

"I can't. I'm sorry." She was quickly getting into hot water as he was Riley's guy. "I have to get going. I agreed to do backups for Riley tonight."

"Riley?"

"My redheaded friend?"

"Oh, *that* Riley. Of course."

"Do you want to come to the show and listen to some eighties and nineties hits? That's all they play at Howl." If she got him closer to Riley, maybe showing him Riley was a force to be reckoned with when she was performing, he would be more interested in her.

"Hm. I'll have to pass, thank you. Maybe we can meet up another time. Will you be at the Driscoll Stock Show and Rodeo on Saturday?"

"I will. My band will be playing on Saturday and Sunday. I'll be getting into town on Friday."

"Me, too. Shall we make it a date?"

Uh boy. Now she was really in the soup. Riley would be brokenhearted if she knew Cash didn't hold a candle for her. She quickly squashed the unwelcome interest she had in the cowboy and demurred. "Let's see how it goes. It's a long drive. We might be tired."

He looked decidedly disappointed for a few seconds, then gave her a big smile. "No pressure. I'd like to know you better."

She'd like to know him better too, but didn't dare for so many reasons. "Thanks. I need to go. See ya in a few days."

"Yeah. See ya then!"

She picked up her guitar and strolled out of the arena, feeling strangely elated but terribly guilty at the same time. What was she supposed to do? Cash was about as compelling as a man

could be. But Riley had basically called dibs and she wasn't about to get in the way. Besides, starting a relationship would be a huge time-sink. Time better spent making music. Music didn't break your heart.

Sharon was late, as it turned out, because that's when the call came in.