

Roped

DiAne N. Gates

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ENDORSEMENTS FOR *ROPED*

“*Roped* has much more tension and suspense per page than any book, adult or otherwise, I’ve read in years. Like the serial books I loved as a young person, *Roped* leaves you panting for the next installment. Entertaining, exciting, and colorful, the descriptions, particularly of the villainous Ed Fairgate after Buster’s demise, helps you remember why books were always better than movies. So much more *show* than *tell*. Crissy’s temper is a major theme. Her growth comes at a high price, but she does her folks proud and wins big. And teaches Christian values. Love certain phrases like, “Shame sifted over me like pollen in the springtime.” Judy Madsen Johnson, Author of *Joy Cometh in the Morning*, *the Joy Postle Blackstone Story* and *Stories from the Front Lines, the Battle Against Abortion*, judymadsenjohnson.com

“I read the novel *Roped* by DiAne Gates, because I was curious to see what kind of work she could produce, having been a writer alongside her for a few years. I was not excited about it because I do not generally like or read fiction. However, I want to say I found it truly a page-turner and I actually enjoyed it very much. I read it in one day, although I had many other things I should have been doing. I found myself, a Granny, quite anxious to know what happened to each character and felt a sense of satisfaction at the end of each episode, coupled with a sense of time passing while I wasn’t reading, something I’ve only before experienced while reading Frank Peretti . DiAne has written a great book for young adults, one that will engage them, I feel sure, and also will inspire teens to do the right thing, a lesson that is much needed in this day. I cannot emphasize my surprise at liking a piece of fiction. To me this says more than any other words I could say. I am glad I read it and look forward to the next in the series. Brava, DiAne!” Katharine Trauger, *The Conquering Mom.com*, katharinetrauger.wordpress.com

“*Roped* is a roller coaster. Thanks to the DiAne Gates’ high-density imagination and spectacular storytelling skills, *Roped* picks up readers as they emerge from childhood and carries them on slick rails into the highs and lows and twisting paths of adolescence. With hands raised in joyful abandon one moment and gripping the lap-bar the next, Crissy Crosby and her friend Chun are in the front car of this coaster. Readers will recognize Crissy—her days filled with family, school,

and friends. But they might not be familiar with her world, the exciting world of youth rodeo. Horses and goat-roping and blue leather chaps with white leather fringe. Practice and risk and behind-the-scenes scheming. Drawing on her own experience, Gates brings readers not just into the arena, but back in the barns, up on a saddle, and out into the bright lights. When the book ends, and screams from the coaster are just an echo over the fairgrounds, both readers and parents will be happy Gates has made *Roped* the first book of a trilogy. Crissy has a lot to learn, and readers will share her education—about rodeo, friends, life. Along with Crissy, they'll grow up some, and see how dealing with life is easier with the help of a God who loves them, all the time.” Kathleen Brown, Author of *A Time for Miracles: Finding Your Way through the Wilderness of Alzheimer's*, www.alzheimershelpandhope.wordpress.com

“No doubt Diane Gates is a writer’s writer! In her newest book, *Roped* her readers will soon fall in love with Crissy Crosby, a high-spirited, headstrong young woman who is forced to learn some very important life lessons as she struggles to overcome and survive some very difficult, painful and unexpected challenges in her young life. *Roped* is creatively written as both an exciting read as well as a ‘words-on-teaching-tool’ for her readers through the challenges and triumphs of this young woman as she faces heartache and heartbreak, trials and tribulations, triumphs and terror, love and forgiveness and the ever-constant thorn in her side, Miss Jodie Lea Fairgate, the bully of all bullies. DiAne Gates uses Crissy’s family, especially the wisdom of her mother, to guide her babe through her hard lesson-learning times. ‘Sometimes our problems are our teachers. Then God gives us a test to show us whether we’ve passed. It takes some of us longer.’ As both writer and former publisher, it is with great joy I commend this book to you. My only regret is that now I must wait for the sequel, *Twisted*.” Barbara LesStrang Baumann, founder of Harbor House Publishers and The AfterLoss Grief Recovery Program, and author of Thos. Nelson Publishers book, *AfterLoss, A Recovery Companion for Those Who Are Grieving*

“*Roped* is not only a fast-moving, exciting rodeo story, it is also a beautifully crafted tale of love, redemption, and forgiveness. Tackling tough issues like racism and physical abuse, Gates deftly intertwines a believable faith message with a gripping plot that young readers will stick with to the end! Hard to believe this is her debut novel!” Heather Blanton, bestselling author, Romance in the Rockies and Love & War in Johnson County series, <http://ladiesindefiance.com/my-novel-blog/>

“*Roped* is action-packed, heartfelt and laden with wonderfully creative similes tucked inside the unfolding of a valuable life lesson. It is a delightful read for teens and adults as well.” Julie B Cosgrove, multi-published author, inspirational writer and public speaker. Learn more about her at www.juliebcosgrove.com.

CHAPTER ONE

HEARTACHE UPON HEARTBREAK

I wiped slick palms on my jeans and shuffled the reins from one hand to the other. I'd done this a hundred times before. But tonight...tonight was different. Tonight ended my last season in the junior rodeo division, and if I couldn't win here, I'd have no chance with the seniors next year.

"Buckle's mine this evening, Crissy." Jimmy Henry's comment sounded more like a question than trash talk, but a cocky grin wrinkled his freckles, and I wondered who he was trying to convince.

All I needed was a catch, a hold, and a flip, and I'd show 'em all. Four quick twists of my rope and that goat would be on the ground. And the buckle would be all mine.

"Crissy Crosby, you're on deck."

The announcer's voice caused a flutter to skip through my stomach. I patted Lollipop's soft chestnut neck and whispered in her ear, "That's us, girl. We're up. Three more minutes."

Papa wore a rodeo championship buckle. Mama had stacks of barrel racing buckles. The buckles Daddy wore for bull riding were ginormous—bunches of 'em.

And me? I'd won nothing. Nada. Thirteen years old and no championship, not one single silver buckle.

I sighed and my shoulders sneaked up to my ears. Next year, I'd be a teensy tadpole in a terrifying pond of competition. My heart pounded like a stampede of spooked steers. And I could feel the tension in the arena rising thick as a rib-eye—rarin' to go.

The rodeo was a barn-blazing sellout tonight. Folks packed into the Terrell arena like the stinky fish my papa ate in the peel-back tin. All the cowboys and cowgirls stomped, whooped, and hollered, anxious for the competition to begin. The aroma of fried everything hovered in the night air.

Lollipop pawed the ground. Somewhere behind me, a bull kicked the hollow iron pipes of his stall. The clanging sent a ripple of restlessness through the stock. *Talk about luck of the draw.* Sure hoped that wasn't my bull.

Glitzy costumes of the other competitors scattered rainbows of light around the dusty arena while my third-generation, blue-checked shirt and grungy jeans left me feeling like leftovers. No glittery stuff for me. No sequins. No rhinestones. Just boring. Dull and boring me.

I tugged my old black hat down to my ears and hunched over the saddle horn so Lollipop could hear me. "Look at that Jodie Lea Fairgate in her Miss Me jeans and Reba blouse. Thinks she's hot stuff. Well, it's gonna take more'n powder and paint to beat us."

Lollipop shivered and tossed her mane.

Why, the sequins and fringe on that gal's shirt woulda made three outfits. *All the clothes in my closet don't cost halfa what she's wearing tonight.*

The buzzer squawked.

Prickles raced from my scalp to my toes, then took a lap up my legs, and around again.

"Crissy Crosby and her horse, Lollipop." The man's voice blared over the PA system and the spotlight swept down the alley and focused on me and my giant chestnut.

The crowd roared again, louder this time.

"Time to get that buckle, Lollipop." I waved to the fans, squared my hat, and shot my thumb toward heaven. Smooching to Lollipop, and with a flick of the reins and a kick to the stirrups, I yelled, "Get the goat!" My mare and I exploded out of the alley and the swirling spotlights followed us into the arena.

Lollipop's hooves pounded the Texas turf and closed the distance to the little brown goat determined to outmaneuver us. She overtook the four-legged target, paced herself alongside, and waited for my command.

Another flick of the reins, and Lollipop slowed.

I swung the rope once over my head and let it fly. The loop hung for a second and then dropped—right on target. My body poured from the saddle like liquid steel and tempered the instant my feet hit the dirt. I grabbed the goat and seconds squeezed into freeze-framed time.

The contentious critter swerved to a slow-mo turn and tried to hook me with his wanna-be horns.

Jumping back, I twisted sideways, grabbed Billy Goat Gruff around the belly, and flipped him over. Seemed like it took a zillion twists of my rope before all four legs were tied tight.

I leaped to my feet, threw my arms in the air, and let a Miss-Hollywood grin take my face captive.

The clock flashed 4.537 seconds. A winning time.

The crowd stood and chanted, again and again, “Cris-sy, Cris-sy, Cris-sy!”

I snatched my old Stetson out of the dirt, slapped it against my leg, and squared the rim on my head. And waited. Waited for the buzzer to sound and qualify my time. Time dripped like tree sap.

And my heart dropped to my boots.

That skuzzy goat wiggled, and squirmed, and rooted in the dirt 'til the strands of rope around its scrawny legs unraveled and pulled apart. Then that stinking animal shook off the ropes, regained its footing, and raced to freedom.

The buzzer sounded. “Crissy Crosby,” the announcer bellowed. “No time.”

A gigantic groan gushed from the crowd. And my silver buckle rode right out the arena on the back of that danged four-legged rebel.

I ripped up the shredded rope and swung back in the saddle. Lollipop trotted me out of the spotlights into the shadows of the alley. No cheers from the crowd. No atta-girl from friends. No. Silver. Buckle.

Jodie Lea Fairgate leaned way over the fence rail into the alley, far as she could stretch. The voice in my head echoed—loser, loser, loser. Our eyes met for a second. Her face glowed drama-queen sassy.

She stood light-pole straight on the second rail and pointed her Fire-and-Ice fingernail right at me. “Why, Crissy Crosby, whatever happened? Don’t you know how to tie a goat?” She threw her head back and cackled.

My cheeks burned branding-iron hot. But I wouldn’t give little Miss Rich Girl the thrill of a reaction.

Lollipop and I loped out of the alley into the darkness behind the arena. I unsaddled her, lugged the saddle to the back gate of our horse trailer, and threw the heavy leather heap inside.

Daddy came up behind me. “Whatdaya think you’re doing?”

I pulled out of his hug and tossed my hat across the front seat of the truck. I turned my head so he couldn’t see my tears and sniffed, “I want to go home.” But my sniff whined like a three-year-old brat.

“I don’t think so, young lady. Since when does a Crosby quit because she fails?”

“Rope was rotten. I know I tied the danged thing right.” Anger welled in my heart, but my voice still squeaked like a sniveling snot.

“Never known you to be a bad sport, daughter. It’s not attractive.” Daddy shut the gate on the back of the horse trailer and paused. “But maybe we ought to go. What with your Nana being sick—”

Nana. I’d forgotten about Nana. I wilted like day-old lettuce. “Daddy, I’m sorry for making excuses. I missed Nana and Mama being here. Papa too.” I offered Daddy my best I’m-sorry-smile. “But they’d just tease me ’bout gettin’ skunked by a goat and a rope. ’Specially Papa.”

“Yep.” He checked the trailer gate then climbed in the truck beside me.

We hadn’t gone far when red flashing lights appeared in the distance.

“Red lights.” I tucked my legs underneath me and pointed in the direction of the glow. “Looks like they’re close to our house.”

Daddy pushed his hat back on his head, leaned forward, and peered in the direction of the lights. “Might be one of those tenant farm houses down the road.”

We turned onto our road and with one voice shouted, “It’s Nana and Papa’s.”

The ambulance and a fire truck in their driveway screamed trouble.

The blood in my veins turned ice-cube cold and shivers shimmied over my skin. My heart tripped the rhythm meter and went straight to sledge-hammer cadence.

Daddy wheeled the truck and trailer onto the dirt road and we banged and bounced across the pasture toward the flashing lights.

“Is it Nana?” The raspy voice coming from my mouth didn’t even sound like mine.

Daddy's chiseled jaw and wrinkled eyebrows said it all. His mouth said nothing. Mama ran out the front door as Daddy threw the door open and jumped out of the truck. She threw her arms around him. "Nana's gone, John." She gasped. "She's gone."

Daddy wrapped his arms around Mama, and she collapsed against his strong shoulder in a heap of sobs.

I shook Daddy's arm. "What? Nana? Gone?" I'd never seen my Mama like this. She was always in control of everything.

They didn't answer. I turned and dashed through the front door. Papa sat, bent over at the kitchen table, his head buried in his hands.

A flurry of people walked in and out of Nana and Papa's bedroom, all of them talking in hushed tones—like somebody died.

I sucked in a gallon of air. Somebody died.

Cotton crammed my brain and my heart 'bout suffocated.

"Papa?"

Strings of fuzz strangled my throat. My body wouldn't stop shivering. And my heart crashed like shards of shattered glass.

Papa looked up and stretched his arms open. I fell inside what had always been my circle of strength, and we cried.

"Mr. Nickels?" A kind-speaking man in a dark suit approached. "We're going to be taking Mrs. Nickels now."

I watched Papa. He gazed at the man with a blank stare, ran his fingers through his hair, and blew his nose. "Another minute, please."

"Of course." The man nodded, stepped back, and whispered to another guy in a dark suit.

Papa hugged me real tight. Then he held me at arm's length. "Nana's with Jesus, Angel Biscuit." He brushed tears from his eyes. "She'd want us to—" Papa choked back another herd of tears that seemed to spring from a place in his heart I'd never seen before.

"Papa? How? So quick?"

He shook his head, released my shoulders, and walked to the gurney. He pulled the shroud back and looked at Nana for a very long time. Then he kissed the top of her forehead—like he always did—and patted her hand.

Struggling to breathe, I looked away. Didn't want to see my Nana. Not like that. Didn't want to remember a single thing about this night.

Papa walked toward the ambulance behind the men taking my Nana away. I slipped up beside him and slid my hand inside his. Papa's tears spilled over the rims of his eyes. And mine did too. I squeezed his rough hand with all the strength I had. I'd take care of my papa. He walked with strength and courage. Courage I sure didn't have as I crept alongside him. But he sure looked tired tonight. And old.

Mama and Daddy stood in the night breeze, their arms locked around each other, the emergency lights splashing a red glow over their faces.

"What will I do without her?" Mama wailed like a lost child knowing she could never be a child again.

The ambulance pulled out of the driveway, cut its flashing lights, and headed toward Terrell.

Standing in the darkness, my mind couldn't even think that word...and...my heart stuttered again. I hadn't even said goodbye. Did she know how much I loved her?

The four of us huddled on the front lawn, like a soggy family pretzel, while the darkness burst with a hallelujah chorus croaked by the crickets and the frogs—their melody harmonizing with our tears.

Papa always told me when one of God's children died, it was shoutin' time in Heaven and a party would be goin' on up there. Tears flowed like a flash flood down my cheeks. *There sure ain't no party down here tonight. My Nana's gone. Gone forever.*

CHAPTER TWO

GRIEF, TRIALS, AND TROUBLE

The next three days were full-up, full-on misery. Rain poured down by the bucketful. Outside and in my heart.

Seemed like the whole town traipsed through Nana and Papa's living room, each person repeating the same thing. "So sorry about your nana, sweetheart. I know just how you feel. So I brought this—" Whatever it was. Aunt Annie's meatloaf. Or my favorite apple pie. Or yummy fried chicken. The dishes were different, but they were supposed to do the same thing—make me feel better.

People brought so much, the food wouldn't fit in the refrigerator. They brought hugs and tears too. But they didn't understand. Had any of them lost their nana? Did they know how it felt to have their heart ripped out and carried off forever?

I stood in the corner of the kitchen, trying to make myself invisible while Papa and Mama laughed over memories. They repeated, "Do you remember when—?"

I wanted no part of their laughing or their remembering. There wasn't a smidgen of a smile in me. Just eyes that leaked and a nose that looked like Rudolph's.

My knees turned to rubber when I thought about the funeral. I'd never been to a funeral before and sure didn't want to go to this one. I slumped in a chair in the corner of the kitchen and wished everyone would go home.

Day turned to night and then into day again. And again. And again.

The morning of the funeral dawned bright and sunny. Shoulda stormed. Woulda matched my heart. Coulda stayed that way forever. Without Nana, well—

We drove in silence to the church. My brain screamed *no*. My feet wanted to run the other way. But I slid into the pew between Daddy and Mama like I was supposed to. Papa filed in behind and we scrunched together like a four-layered sorrow sandwich.

The sanctuary looked like Sunday morning. Except for all those flowers. And that casket. I couldn't look at Nana, but I couldn't not look at her either. She lay in that box,

like a sleeping princess. Beautiful and peaceful. But Papa's kiss could never make her wake up. She'd never give me her you're-my-sweet-pea smile again.

I closed my eyes and sat with my hands folded in the front pew.

Daddy leaned over, put his arm around me, and whispered in my ear, "You okay, sugar?"

I nodded. But I couldn't listen to the preacher and I couldn't look at him either. Not while Nana laid there. And the endless whirlpool of faces? I just wanted those people to stop hugging me and stop saying they were sorry.

Papa blew his nose. I leaned forward and watched tear drops the size of peas roll down his cheeks. Mama put her arm around Papa's shoulders, snuggled closer to him, and dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

Lord, why do we have funerals? Mama says they bring comfort. But this sure didn't look like comfort to me. When I die, I don't want some little kid to have to sit through my funeral. No, sir. No folks. No food. No funeral.

* * *

Back home, a day or so after company left, Daddy went back to work, and Mama set about cleaning the houses. Ours and Papa's. My Papa sat at our kitchen table, looking through photo albums and drinking coffee, his face washed clean of the Papa I knew before Nana died.

I dreaded going back to school. What if I had a meltdown if somebody said, "Sorry 'bout your grandma?" What if the teacher hugged me? What if—

The smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing meant I'd better get downstairs for breakfast. I pinched my cheeks and messed my hair. Slinking down the stairs, I slid into my chair at the table and put on my best I'm-sick-and-gonna-throw-up face.

Mama turned and studied me for half a second. "Forget the drama, you're going back to school. Today." Her voice held a sharp edge, but her eyes were soft.

Dang it. I never could fool her.

So I ate my breakfast and made it out the door just as the bus pulled to a stop. Jimmy Henry scooted over so I could sit next to him. But he didn't say a word. No one said a word. Maybe they didn't know what to say. So I stared at the floor all the way to school and prayed this day would end.

We got to school and everyone refused to look at me. Don't know which was worse, the starin' or the ignorin'.

Between fifth and sixth period, I came up behind Jodie Lea Fairgate in the hallway, gossiping with a group of her friends.

"Her grandma? Mean old woman. 'Bout time she died. Old people are useless, don't y'all think?" Jodie Lea stood with her hands on her hips, eyeballing each girl like she'd just asked the question of the century.

Every word jabbed my heart like an army of hornets.

One of the girls noticed me, went bug-eyed, and slapped a hand over her mouth.

Jodie Lea turned and stared straight into my eyes and shrugged. She tossed her kinky red curls, stuck her snooty nose in the air, and sashayed away from me. "Just wait 'til y'all see what my daddy has in store for those Crosbys." She spoke like I wasn't even there.

And those silly girls giggled and straggled down the hallway like a litter of baby skunks following their mama.

My eyes stung. I raced for the bathroom or I would have punched Jodie Lea. Hateful. That girl was hateful. Plumb hateful. My nana? A mean old woman? I should've punched her. And what did she mean by that last comment? Her daddy had a surprise for us? Tears raced down my cheeks. I brushed them away, but they refused to stop. I looked at my pitiful reflection in the mirror.

The final bell rang. I blew my nose, hurried to the bus, and grabbed the backseat so I could sit by myself. And I had to do this all over again tomorrow and every tomorrow for the rest of my life.

The bus stopped at our gate. I jumped off just as Daddy's truck barreled down the road, leaving a trail of dust swirling behind. I waved, but he passed right by me. He turned into the driveway, parked the truck, and strode into our house before I got through the gate. That wasn't like Daddy.

I climbed the steps to the porch.

Daddy's voice erupted from the kitchen. "Deborah, that miserable low-life knows exactly what he's doing."

I opened the screen door. It squeaked like a bow raking across fiddle strings. Daddy and Mama turned. Their faces showed no trace of bad, sad, glad, or mad.

“Hi, y’all.” I tossed my books on the table. Nobody said a word. “What’s the matter?”

They shared a you-want-to-tell-her glance.

Jodie Lea’s ugliness darted through my mind. “Jodie Lea was her obnoxious self today.”

Daddy’s eyes ignited. “What’d that brat say?”

“Said her daddy had a surprise for us.”

Daddy banged his fist on the table.

Mama laid a hand on his arm. “Not now.”

Too late. That vein in Daddy’s neck throbbled. He clenched his jaw and his voice sounded like a growl. He turned, yanked the door open, and stomped toward the barn. The screen door slammed behind him in a ricochet of bangs.

Mama faced me and brushed the curls from my forehead. “Except for Jodie Lea, how’d your day go, sweetheart?”

“No one spoke to me. All day. Made me feel like a ghost.”

“Today was hard for all of us.” Her voice cracked, but she hugged me extra tight and set out some cookies and lemonade. Mama sat down at the table, pulled out the chair next to her, and patted the seat. “Let’s talk.” The expression on her face rumbled *storm warning*.

I slid into the chair and nibbled the edge of a cookie.

“I have bad news, sweetheart.” Her eyebrows puckered like a raisin. She buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shuddered, and she sobbed. Great gasping sobs.

The cookie stuck in my throat. Every nerve in my body snapped to attention. “Is-is Papa all right?”

Mama’s hand grasped mine. “Papa’s fine.” But the tears continued to flash like a flood from a storm miles away.

I’d never seen Mama cry like this. Even at Nana’s funeral. I leaned over and wrapped my arms around her. “What’s wrong, Mama? What’s wrong?” Tears filled my eyes and I squeezed her tighter.

“I-I miss your—Na-na.” The words struggled to escape. “She was my mama, and now she’s gone, and I don’t have a mama.”

A wave of light blinked neon in my brain. I’d only thought about my pain. My sadness. My missing Nana. “Mama, Nana’s still your mother.” I breathed deep and more words tumbled off my tongue. “She’s still my nana too.”

Mama’s hands dropped. She sniffed and stared at me like I’d given her a hall pass out of grief. “Thank you, sweetheart. You’re right. Nana’s with Jesus. She’s more alive than we are.” She blew her nose and gathered me close. “Ed Fairgate bought the company your daddy worked for. He fired your daddy and his team today.” Her voice was just above a whisper.

A hundred firecrackers exploded in my brain. I leaped to my feet. “He did what? Why?” Jodie Lea’s nasty comment raced through my mind. “Ed Fairgate did that on purpose. He planned it, just like Jodie Lea said.” My voice registered somewhere between a squeak and a scream.

Mama’s lips still quivered. She pushed her chair back from the table, picked up the potato peeler, got up, and walked to the sink. And stood there sniffing and peeling potatoes.

Did God hate us too? What else could happen?

“Anybody home?” The screen door creaked and Papa walked into the kitchen.

I jumped up and ran to the door. “Papa!” I grabbed him in a monster hug. Least I still had his hugs. His Old Spice shaving lotion was the best thing I’d smelled all day.

He kissed the top of my head and looked at Mama. “What’s going on, daughter?”

“Ed Fairgate bought Johnson Electric. He fired John and his team today.”

His face drained of all color. “Did he give a reason?” His voice measured just short of I’m gonna have to hurt you.

Mama didn’t turn around. She just kept peeling potatoes. “Said they didn’t have enough work. But Fairgate hired a replacement team before John and his guys were out of the building.”

Papa put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “I’m sorry, honey.” He pulled a chair out, collapsed beside me, and ran his fingers through his hair. “We’ll get through this. Together. Why, I reckon God’s still at work.”

Mama's shoulders shook.

Papa stood up, pulled me out the chair behind him, and we folded Mama into our group hug. Papa's hugs always made me feel safe. We would be all right. Somehow. Papa said so.

Mama sniffed. "I know, Daddy. But this makes me furious to see John humiliated. I'd just like to—"

"God will handle those Fairgates, and He'll take care of us too. Always has and always will."

I looked up and asked, "What's God going to do about the hateful things Jodie Lea said to me today? And the mean things she said about Nana?"

Papa released us and he twisted the chair backward and sat back down at the table. "Sit down, and I'll tell you about Miss Jodie Lea."

I flopped in my chair and prepared to hear one of Papa's famous stories, but his face and his mind seemed to be remembering times, sad times, in the past.

Papa took my hand in his and stroked my fingers. "Yeah, she's got a rude, nasty mouth. But that child never knew her grandmas."

My turn to play the bug-eyed game. "They didn't like her either?"

Papa stared at the floor. "I'm gonna ignore those stupid words, girl. Both of 'em died before Jodie Lea turned two."

"Did they die in a wreck or something?"

"No. One had cancer and died before Jodie Lea was born. Then her mama's mother, well, there was lots of talk about Mrs. Jenkins's death. No one really knows the truth, 'cept maybe Ed and Suzie Fairgate."

"Did she run away, Papa?"

Papa looked out the kitchen window, perhaps reliving the dreadful news. He didn't answer. He seemed stuck in another place. A long time ago.

"Uh, 'course not, Angel Biscuit. Point is, Jodie Lea never had a grandma's love. And hurt people—hurt people, honey."

I squirmed, uncomfortable with these new images of Jodie Lea. "Sorry 'bout her grandmas. But when she's shootin' off her mouth and hittin' me with bullets, it'll still be hard to remember she's hurtin'."

“I know, kiddo. But next time she fires at you, just duck. Let God handle her.”

I cocked my head sideways. “Well, maybe.”

Papa got up, took Mama’s arm, and pulled her toward the door. “Let’s go talk to John.”

They walked out the door. Their voices floated behind them, talking about Daddy finding another job and how we were going to pay the bills.

My mind played back Papa’s words about Jodie Lea’s hurting heart. They didn’t make a lick of sense to me. I thought her heart just pumped so her mouth could spew words to hurt folks.

Duck, huh? Wouldn’t duckin’ make me a coward?

CHAPTER THREE

NO MONEY, NO GOAT, NO DREAMS?

“Crissy? Crissy Crosby? Do you hear me, girl?”

The teacher stood beside me with a scowl on her face like she’d eaten a mouthful of dirt, and her eyes shouted *annoyed*.

I jerked up with a start. “Oh, Ms. Daniels, sorry. I just—”

Jimmy Henry choked down a snort.

Ms. Daniels held up my test and so the whole class saw the neon red D- on the top of the paper. “Maybe if you paid attention in class your grades would be better.”

Math. I hated it. And I had to be the dumbest seventh grader at Raines Middle School.

Giggles rippled clear to the back of the room. Jodi Lea’s laughter loudest of them all. Far as I could tell, seeing me get in trouble was her reason for being.

I took the paper from the teacher’s hand, collapsed against the back of my chair, and stared at the dismal grade. Oh, man, Mama and Daddy were going to be screaming mad. This stupid test could drive a spike in my dreams for a buckle.

Ms. Daniels handed Jimmy his paper—my turn to snicker. He had a D- too.

At the back of the room, three girls pretended to huddle over a homework assignment. Jodie Lea sat with her back to me. Then two of the girls looked at me and giggled. They whispered and pretended to study again. I could tell they were saying something hateful. *Prob’ly ’bout me*. Papa said *duck*. I would try that. *Once*.

The school bell rang and I pushed through the crowded hallway toward the school bus. With the Tyler Youth Rodeo two months away, I needed to practice. Last month’s mistake couldn’t happen again, not if I wanted that buckle.

Papa Parker warned me before that dreadful night in the arena, “Check your rope, girl. Be sure it’s good.”

But, I’d used old rope from the tack box, rope I practiced with. And it had broken. Now there was no money for new rope and goodness knows when there would be.

Winning that championship would change our family's crummy year. With Nana gone and Daddy losing his job, nobody smiled at our house. And we had no money. Somebody needed to step-up and make good things happen for our family. Looked like I had to take charge.

I'd saved lunch money and taken odd jobs with neighbors to earn my entry fee. But time had almost run out, and I still didn't have enough.

Mama prayed when she needed something. Got on her knees and talked to God. She'd asked God for a job when Daddy lost his, and, sure enough, He gave her one. Only problem? Now she worked. All the time.

If prayer worked for Mama, maybe it would work for me. So I prayed hard. *Dear God, please make a way for me to earn that money I need to enter this rodeo.*

Would God really listen to stuff from a kid like me? He must've, 'cause Mrs. Bryan, the widow lady down the road, asked me to clean the stalls in her barn the day after I prayed.

Had to have been a hundred years since those stalls had been shoveled. When I pushed open that old barn door, it squeaked and groaned. Not a glimmer of light shined inside. Spider webs wrapped 'round my face and stuck like plastic wrap. It was gag-me-stinkin' inside. I crept to the other end of the barn, expectin' the boogey man to jump out and grab me, and pushed open the other door to get some air and light in so I could see and breathe.

It took a week of scraping and digging to get rid of that disgusting stuff—*whatever* it was—that stuck to the shovel even when I smacked it on the ground outside the barn. Mrs. Bryan said I did a great job and gave me a tip, making enough for the rodeo fee and spending money besides.

Now this D- in math could ruin everything.

I hopped to the second step of the school bus in one leap, hoping to get past Jodie Lea. But she saw me and hollered, "Crissy? Hey, Crissy Crosby, sit with me." She flashed a sickening, sweet smile and patted the seat next to her.

I turned to speak to the bus driver, hoping some other unfortunate soul would grab that seat. "Hi, Mrs. Moore, you okay today?"

But Jodie Lea grabbed my arm and pulled me into her row.

“Oh, garbage.” I stumbled over her legs and fell into the seat, waiting for the drama to begin.

“You going to enter the Tyler Rodeo?” She blinked those mascara-loaded lashes at me. “Oh, I forgot, you can’t ’cause your daddy doesn’t have a job and y’all don’t have enough money.” Jodie Lea drawled out each syllable, loud as she could, never pausing her stupid sing-song whine for a reply.

The hair on the back of my neck snapped to attention. I wanted to smack the sass out of her, but choked out an answer instead. “Matter of fact, Mama sent my entry money off this morning.”

She patted my hand. Her touch made my skin crawl. “Really? What a waste. I know ya’ll needed that money for *food* or something.”

My cheeks burned. Jodie Lea didn’t care if we starved to death. But Papa said duck. What was she up to this time?

She smirked and added, “I suppose you plan to ride—Lollipop, isn’t it?”

I nodded, but my brain screamed shut your mouth.

“Well, now, that old nag doesn’t stand a chance against the new mare Daddy bought me.”

Ahh, so that’s what this conversation’s about. Her *new* horse and a silver buckle.

She kept chattering. On and on. “She’s won bunches of money, blah, blah, blah, and I just know I’m going to win that buckle now that I have her. Blah, blah, blah.”

I interrupted her monologue. “I earned the entry money myself, Jodie Lea. You ever do that?”

She blinked and stretched herself clear to haughty. “I don’t have to do that.” She puckered her nose and stuck it in the air. Then turned to aggravate someone else.

A sigh of relief escaped me and I leaned against the bus window. *Color this encounter over.* My hair tumbled over my eyes and hid a tear that etched a little path down my cheeks. Why had I let that danged girl get to me?

We had known each other forever. Our mothers had been best friends all through school. Her mama was kinda nice. Always wondered how she managed to have such a rotten kid.