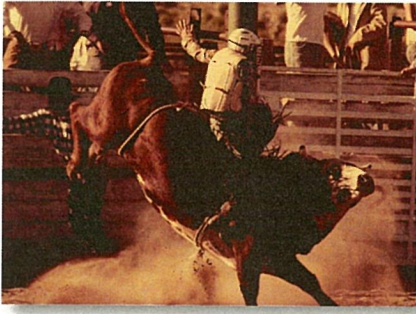


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LARA S WILLIAMS

## ISA'S LAST RODEO



The bull's hide shifted beneath her fingers like hot salt. Saliva, thick and tainted at the edge with blood, bubbled at an uneven edge of teeth. One eye, white all around, swivelled to and fro, unable to see her through the hanging leather saddles. She pushed two fingertips deep into the bull's meeting of shoulder blade and rib, to ease its frightened shuffling.

"Number four, Caradine?"

"John, you know who I am."

He lowered the clipboard from his face and uncovered a smile that hadn't changed since their first days in school. 'I have to ask.'

"Being professional. I like it."

"They asked me to do it last night.' He leant on a wooden post beside her and tapped the board against his knee. 'I even got to check the bulls in.'

"Is your mother proud?"

"Ma didn't say much. Thinks I'm wasting my time."

"She doesn't know what she's talking about. You're an official." Caradine hooked her leg around the middle slat of the fence and bent over the bull's back, smelling earthy sweat on his body. His ears craned forward and she followed their tips toward the ring where two young boys were raking thin the blood of calves through the ruptured sand.

"You better come register now," John said to her bent legs. "They need all riders in order."

"If you say so, John." She met his eyes and saw how much he wanted her walking beside him, under his authority. "I'm just sizing up my partner."

He waited until she had taken one more deep breath of the bull, then tapped the heel of her

boot. Caradine stepped down beside him and they walked through the narrow steel corridors and around the ring. The boys had finished raking and were climbing over the perimeter fence, trousers dusty at the knees. Caradine recognised the taller of the two and smiled as he collected tools from the ground and struggled to hook them below one arm.

“What time is the bull riding kicking off?” she asked John.

“Co-ordinator says three but everything’s running behind. They just finished the rope and tie.”

“Did someone get hurt?”

John looked blank and Caradine almost lost him in a sudden knot of spectators rushing from the entrance gates toward the stands.

“How late do you think we’re going to be?” she shouted at John’s black-rimmed hat.

“Not everyone’s here yet,” he called. “Bowers rang in.”

“What happened?”

John frowned, then said, “ah right, no nothing happened. He’s still at work.”

“They opened the mine today?”

“All in the name of tourism. I think the Mardi Gras parade is starting there.”

“Yeah it is. I thought they’d spend the day preparing.”

John waved an arm at the throngs of people surrounding them, spilling out toward the scruffy edges of the distant car park. “Look at all this money. Why close a major tourist spot when there are so many tourists? All right, I have to find Maureen. Just go stand over there by the trestles.” He winked her goodbye and Caradine squeezed his upper arm in affection for his undermined authority.

Above the registry table hung a stiff plastic sign: ‘Mount Isa - Rodeo Capital of Australia’. A pigeon had landed where the twine ties met their metal anchors. Its balance was disturbed by a light wind shuffling the plastic beneath its claws and Caradine watched its shaky tension half-heartedly. When it whittered free she blinked and looked down at the desk.

Three men sat in low-backed plywood chairs, each crouching over a lined piece of paper and a bell. One saw her hovering and straightened a stack of folders inside the circle of his arms.

“Caradine, number four,” she offered.

"Yes we know," he said. "The girl." The man on the end grinned and Caradine lifted her chin and accepted the forms pushed loose-leaf toward her.

"Do you want them back straight away?"

"If you don't mind." They ducked back to their papers and Caradine took a pen and hunkered in a sinewy twist before the table. "Not here, over there," the middle one rushed, pointing to a roped-off section on the bottom level of the crowd stands. She snatched the sheets and squeezed in beside a woman with a baby swaddled tight to her chest. The woman smiled and handed a cheese stick to her child.

"Are you riding?" she asked as Caradine scratched her date of birth.

"Looks like it."

"My husband's riding. He's not very good but he loves the bulls."

"Does he know how little faith you have in him?"

The woman looked at her with a disappointed pout. "I only meant that he's a beginner."

Caradine laughed. "Maybe he'll surprise you."

She shifted in her seat and her baby turned to fix Caradine with two enormous velvet eyes.

"Cute kid. Is it a boy?"

"Yes." She bounced him on her knee with one hand cupping his head. "Do you have any children?"

"I'm nineteen."

"So was I."

The two women stared at each other until Caradine stood and nodded goodbye. The baby started screaming as she returned her forms to the silent judges.

Each bull was fenced in a steel enclosure evenly curved side by side around the ring. While other riders were discussing techniques over each bull's pen, Caradine spent no time inspecting the number and variety of the animals. She didn't care for their bulk or weak spots, their speed or even the exact length and point of horn. She believed their first meeting should be one between equals fused in battle. Though she sat four feet higher they would both end on the ground.

It had gone past two and from her seat at the top of the stands, Caradine watched John hustle a new arrival, stocky and pale, toward the judges. Like her he was directed to sit and write his details and she left her vantage point, descending amongst the children and sweat and empty beer cups, to sit one level above and directly behind him. She stretched up over his shoulder and saw his name was Byron.

"You're in Isa," she said.

He started and turned to look into her eyes, mere inches from his own.

"Sorry?"

She pointed to his form. "You wrote Isla."

He looked down and grunted. "I did that on the application forms, too."

"Isla is a real place." She dipped down beside him and motioned to the ring. "You done this before?"

"Only at home."

"Where's that?"

"Wagga."

"That's quite a way. You staying at the Irish Club?"

He gave her a startled look. "Have you been following me?"

"No," she laughed. "Everyone stays there. You must have booked a while ago, though. Did your parents come?"

He rubbed the back of a hand across his meaty forehead. "They died."

Caradine hadn't considered his age would allow him deceased parents and reasoned their deaths were unexpected.

"Sorry to hear that."

Byron shrugged like he was shaking off a chill. "Do you live here?"

"Yeah, other side of the mines. My dad used to work the elevator."

"Elevator?"

"For tourists. They give guides in the chambers. They're like caves."

"Do they like what you do?"

Caradine leant her elbows on the tier behind them. "They didn't know until last year but they've been great. They're somewhere in the crowd."

"Is it always this busy?"

"Oh yeah. Rodeo brings the people in; for Mardi Gras, the mines. We've got all kinds of, well." She pointed to a tangle of women lurking by the bull riders, eating vendor nachos and nuts. All wore the same cropped T-shirt: The Hard Times Mine. "That place is deserted most of the year."

"I like the name. You said your dad worked there?"

"It's been years now," Caradine dismissed with loose fingers. "He couldn't handle the damp any longer. Gave him bronchitis. He wanted to get into officiating the rodeo. He brought my brother and I here every tournament."

"Rodeo die hard?"

"Not my brother. He's an artist. I think you have to love them in some way to keep coming here."

"Them?"

Caradine pointed at the enclosures shimmering under the sun. "The bulls."

Byron thinned his lips and looked back down at his forms. "Actually, I don't like bulls so much. They're ugly and angry."

"That's odd."

"Not if you think about it." He leant close to Caradine and she rested an elbow on her knee. "What do you do to something you hate?"

"I tend to ignore it."

"Or overpower it. What do you think we do here?"

Caradine made a little 'humph' of defeat and thought of the pleasure she gained from scraping her fingertips through the stiff wire hair on a bull's neck.

Byron crossed one leg over the other knee and folded his forms in half. 'So what number are you?'

"Four."

"Ah, my direct competition. I'm third."

"So I'm following your example?"

"Not so much following as trumping." He glanced up at the megaphones hanging on each corner of the stands as they started to whine. Caradine watched the judges bicker over the microphone until one moved away from the table and held it to his lips.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the annual Mount Isa Rodeo Bull Riding." The crowds in the tiers stood to stomp their feet on the mesh sheeting below and the next few words were lost beneath the din. The judges waited for relative calm before continuing, 'We have some amazing riders lined up today, some having come from as far as the islands.'

"Islands?" Caradine muttered in Byron's ear. "What islands are they talking about?"

"I met a Tasmanian rider in the car park," he replied. "Technically, that counts." He held out his hand for Caradine to shake and stood, waist hardly clearing her head. "I have to hand these in. I'll see you from the ring."

She smiled and reclaimed her hand from his, damp and large as it was. As he left she noticed his limp, pronounced at the ankle, like something clung close to his calf. She took note of the beer vendor and made her way from the crowd toward the bull pens, taking care to avoid other riders collected like debris around the ring.

Caradine, suspended once again over the bull she now knew would be hers, stared over the vast mess of car park during the first ride. Though her eyes locked onto wheel tracks and registration plates, her ears were attuned to every leap and pound of the fight behind her. Under her own breathing were the man's hisses and grunts, stubborn snorts of the bull and the plaited rope's slap on the saddle. She felt his fall, echoed by the inhalations of the crowd. He hadn't made eight seconds.

The second rider was announced as Bowers and Caradine turned to watch him; a man hunched inside his bulky frame like clothing spilt from a bag. She had seen him practising rides on his family's property, dotted in separate paddocks around Kalkadoon airport. During her years working in the airport Macdonald's, Caradine often spent lunch breaks by the

service exits, following his figure as it tumbled back and forth through the fields.

An official opened Bowers' gate and the bull launched out into the ring. Bowers had an aggressive style of riding Caradine had never seen in close proximity before. He kept his arm near the bull bent at the elbow to pull him low in the saddle, and the other twisted back over his head rather than held straight. The bull was grizzled, one horn broken at some moment past, and he bucked with such ferocity that Bowers bounced in the saddle rather than rocked. The five second bell rang before he overbalanced. He was up almost before hitting the dirt and the bull was ushered back into its pen by men waiting by the side. Caradine clapped and looked around for Byron.

A hand encircled her forearm and she swivelled on the cold steel rail to see John, eyes focused past her toward the ring. "We need to get you on the bull."

"But I'm still one away."

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"We want to size you." John directed her to the other side of the fence where a lanky, red-haired man introduced himself as Reg and helped her to stand on the third rung, legs spread, with one foot on either side of the enclosure. The bull smelt her above him and shuffled backwards away from her body. She leant from the waist and took the plait, steadying him and lowering herself until she settled heavy and straight.

He shifted violently to the right, bringing her leg against the fence with enough force to knock Reg, leaning on the other side, forward a full foot. He swore and scowled at the bull through the slats.

"You'll have your hands full with him," he said. "Actually John, he looks too big for her."

John took in Caradine's stiff back and two small sharp knees cleaving to the bull's ribs. He scratched at his chin and asked, "you've been on one this size before, right?"

"Yes."

"Any injuries?"

She shook her head and he shrugged and waved a hand at Reg. "Let her go ahead." A clattering across the ring turned his gaze and Caradine looked up to see Byron's bull edging through its entrance gate. Their dance began torturous and slow.

Byron held one hand high above his head, bent at the wrist, and rocked with each undulation of the bull. She saw the two fuse as though Byron recognised something of himself in the

creature below him. Eight seconds passed and though two rodeo officials jogged close to help Byron dismount, he made no move to leave the bull. His free hand reached for his leg and struggled with something under the jeans.

Caradine was manoeuvring herself to climb back onto the fence rails when Reg threw himself at the ringside steel, voice raised to the officials opposite. John had disappeared, leaving his clipboard collapsed on the earth. Caradine pushed both hands into the bull's neck, lifting her eye line over the gate to see into the ring. Byron was clutching the bull around one horn and brandishing a flick knife wide and level with his shoulder. Horrified, Caradine watched him stab the blade low and deep into the bull's throat. A fanfare of screams broke out from the crowd as he pulled it free and drove again at the join of neck and chest.

The bull bellowed and stopped dead from a glancing run. Byron released the plait and rolled over the bull's head, catching one thick thigh on the point of a horn. He landed splayed in a tangle of limbs while the bull crashed down chest first beside him.

Reg was climbing over the outer ring perimeter, out of reach of Caradine stretching for help. Her bull, spooked by the sudden smell of blood, jerked toward the gate and Caradine's foot, arched on the smooth leather saddle, slid free and she dropped to the dirt between the bull and the fence. She rolled onto her back below the bull's head, dust patterned on her bottom lip. Hooves pounded beside her body and she dug her heels into the earth, backing herself flat against the fence. She couldn't see through the mist of dust thrown up by the bull's movements and curled her legs under her chin, becoming as small as her height would allow.

She heard a voice shouting for help and managed to squeeze her arm underneath the bottom rung, reaching for something to take hold of. Fingers found hers and she was dragged part way out of the stall before a pair of elbows hooked under her armpits and pulled her free. Caradine coughed up a lungful of soil, collapsed in a broken cross.

"You all right?"

She focused her eyes and tried to sit straight.

"What the hell did you do?" she screamed. "What did you..."

Byron shook her shoulder until she was silent.

"Are you all right?"

Caradine patted her body. "I'm fine." She got to her knees and stared as Byron hunched out of his long-sleeved shirt and threw it to the ground between them. His forearms were streaked with dark black blood.

"Is the bull dead?"

"What?" He stared out across the crowd as though waiting for a signal.

"The bull? Is it dead?"

Byron smiled and she saw how brown his teeth were at the roots. "Yeah. It's dead."

"Why?"

Byron looked at her as though she had asked why he was human. "I don't like the bulls." Someone called his name and he stood in two fractured movements. Caradine turned on one knee to see Reg sprinting toward them.

"You better go," she said.

Byron chucked her on the shoulder and started to run. John appeared at Caradine's shoulder and helped her stand.

"Are you hurt?" He touched the blood patted on her hands.

"It's not mine."

He sighed and squeezed her wrists before rushing to meet Reg. Together they ran after Byron, now making his way through the first layer of parked cars. Caradine picked at the blood under her fingernails, lightening as it dried. Overhead, the megaphones announced her name.

