

## **About *The Sheriff of Cassidy County*\***

SHERIFF JOEL HARPER (aka Sheriff Grumpypants) isn't looking for love when he finds CARA MCKELLAN stranded on the side of the road. But the attractive red-head knocks him off his feet—literally when she tumbles down a hill and takes him with her. An unexpected steamy weekend together leaves them both wanting more. They can get their happily-ever-after but first, they must survive Cara's attempts to live life on her terms, Joel's guilt-ridden past, nosey small town do-gooders, and a meth-making madman.

### ***And now an excerpt...***

Cara sighed when Joel tucked his cellphone back into his pocket and frowned.

"You have to go." She didn't ask, it was obvious.

"Our annual horseshoe tournament is part of the fundraiser tonight and the Sheriff's department has a team."

She swallowed. "I see." Her cloud nine took a nose-dive.

"It's kind of a big deal to Shelby and the guys because we've won the last two years."

When she looked disappointed, which he kind of liked, Joel added, "This year, Bryan and Dave shot their mouths off and made a bet with the guys at the county transportation department and if we don't win, we have to serve them breakfast while wearing loser t-shirts."

She smiled at the mental picture of Joel wearing a t-shirt showing off his incredible shoulders with loser written across his pecs. "You're right. That is a big deal."

He wrapped one of her curls around his finger. "You'll come with me?"

"Sure."

He opened the door slowly and looked around before pulling her into the hallway with him. She followed him out a back door and into the alley behind the buildings. The cool night air was refreshing after the heat they'd generated in the storeroom.

Across from the bar was an open space between two brick buildings. Lights strung overhead between the structures glowed over the crowd. The occasional chink of metal hitting metal rang out followed by cheers and some groans.

Shelby emerged from the throng and waved them over.

With her hands on her hips, she scowled at Joel. “Where have you been? We’re almost up. Gram called and she’s having one of her episodes and I have to go. If you don’t find someone else, we’ll have to forfeit. We decided Cara could do it because she’s your date.”

Cara’s heart thumped hard at the mention of her name. “Do what now?”

“Play horseshoes on our team. Hurry, you need to report to the judge.” She gave Joel a push which didn’t move him but he got the idea because he took Cara’s hand and led her toward the group.

“Wait! I can’t do this. In front of all these people?” She tried pulling away but he kept a tight hold.

Joel glanced at her with a tight smile. “You’ll be fine. I promise.”

With the blood rushing in her ears, she let him lead her into the crowd.

Once they reached the center of the action, Cara focused on the long rectangular sandbox edged with railroad ties. Two sets of stakes allowed four teams to play at a time. The player closest to her held the horseshoe up in front, eyeing the stake at the other end, and in a smooth motion brought his arm back, then forward and released the shoe, sending it in a graceful arc to the stake at the end of the field.

*Her with flying metal objects?* “Um...this has ‘really bad idea’ written all over it.”

Joel shot her a look like maybe he agreed. “There’s Natalie and Bryan.”

Cara continued to watch the action in the box as he led her away and she bumped into him when he stopped. Bryan, Natalie, and Joel faced off with four men of varying sizes, who glared back.

A tall, skinny guy with a full beard cocked his head at Joel. "You ready to forfeit, Sheriff? Just remember when you serve me breakfast, I like my eggs over easy."

The men on his team chuckled and one said, "We got some frilly aprons for you to wear."

Joel drew himself up. "Hell no. Cara's going to play." He tugged her forward a step from where she'd been hiding behind him.

"She's not part of the Sheriff's department. We've already allowed you an exception with Natalie," said Beard-guy.

Joel shrugged. "She's here with me so she counts."

One of the other guys looked over Cara and asked, "You ever pitched horseshoes?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "Nope."

Beard-guy smiled along with his teammates. "She'll do."

As Joel led her to the opposite end of the pit with two of the guys from the other team, she whispered, "Seriously, Joel, I can't do this. Not in front of everybody."

He stopped and looked into her eyes with a glint of something. Determination maybe?

"You can do this. Nobody cares what happens, okay? All you have to do is toss it towards the opposite stake. It doesn't matter if you score or not, okay? I'll take care of making the points." He gave her a cocky grin and she warmed in spite of the cold sweat seeping from her pores.

"Okay." *Did I just say that?* She was way too agreeable when it came to this man.

He beamed at her and, damn, if that wasn't reward enough.

When the players in the pit finished their game, they were given a time to warm-up and she followed Joel into the pit.

“Just put your thumb here by this burr and your fingers underneath. Then hold it up and line the ends of the shanks up with the bottom of the stake, pull back and release.” He demonstrated but didn’t let go. “Now you try.”

He offered one of the horseshoes and she took it. “Wow. That’s heavier than I thought.”

Side by side, he had her practice sighting the stake and swinging her arm back. Her fingers slid on the metal and she wiped her hands on her skirt.

A whistle blew and her stomach dropped right into her boots. She glanced around to locate an exit route.

“I’ll go first so you can see how we do it. You stand at the back of the pit, out of the way.”

She wrapped an arm around her quivering stomach and eagle-eyed every movement Joel made so she could do the same thing. Bonus, he looked all muscly and strong as he went through the motions and his jeans cupped that perfect butt she’d had her hands on a few minutes ago.

She maybe got lost in the view because before she knew it, he was waving her up to the stake. *Oh, crap. Oh, crap. What’s my mantra? I’m a strong...oh, crap!*

He dropped the horseshoe into her damp hand and positioned her in the pit next to the stake.

Tilting her chin up so she looked at him, Joel nodded and smiled. “You’ve got this.”

Her body quivered and her skin prickled with the weight of the crowd’s gaze. She was sure every single one of them was watching her. The earth’s spin slowed while everything around her blurred into a sea of watchful faces. Sounds fell away until the roar of her blood

through her veins was the only thing she could hear. She forced a swallow around the lump in her throat.

She glanced back at Joel, one more time, and he nodded again. *You've got this.*

When she turned her gaze back to the stake, she wasn't quite so shaky and it was easier to swallow. *I am a smart, confident, self-reliant woman.*

One more swallow and she swung her arm back and swept it forward. Without the horseshoe. She blinked at her empty hand as a dull thud sounded behind her. She spun around as Joel fell back into the people behind him. *Oh, no! I did it again.*

The guys caught Joel under the arms before he hit the ground. He shook his head, winced and then looked up at his buddie. "Son of a bitch. She did it again."

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