



# KNOX

Book One: Montana Marshalls  
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# Chapter 1

Oh goody, now Knox got to watch his troublemaking little brother break his ornery neck.

“Tate, this is a bad idea.” Knox said it in his big-brother voice, but Tate hadn’t a hope of hearing him over the cheers as he walked into the straw-padded arena under the hanging lights of the beer tent toward the mechanical bull.

His renegade brother nailed the rough-edged charm of a cowboy, complete with his faded jeans, a black Stetson over his dark brown hair, a scrape of off-duty dark whiskers, dusty boots, and a swagger that suggested he’d been born on a bull.

Tate always did know how to put on the game to charm the ladies.

The organizers of the after-hours entertainment of NBR-X, the professional bull-riding tour, knew their crowd—beer-gesturing, cowboy-hatted rowdies who spent the evening watching young men pit their lives against angry, thousand-pound animals hoping to crush their rider into the dirt or against the rodeo boards.

The scent of blood spilled today turned wannabe cowboys into daredevils.

The crowd knotted around the circle, shouting smack and laying bets for or against Tate’s success. The ruddy rodeo aroma—horsehide, dust, hay, and plenty of craft beer—only added to the trouble brewing in Knox’s gut.

Probably Tate would survive. Knox had seen Tate ride—had taught him how to stay on the back of a real bull, and frankly, a smart man would ante up a Ben Franklin to the bookmaker collecting cash in an oversized boot.

But Knox worked too hard for his cash, and to his knowledge, Tate hadn’t been on a bull in years.

“C’mon, Tate, let’s go,” Knox said, a last-ditch effort to put a halt to the crazy. But when Tate got something in his head, he practically turned into one of those bulls in the nearby barn. Red-eyed, focused, and lethal.

The crowd exploded with fervor when Tate handed his red Solo cup to a blonde wearing a hot-pink Bull Riders Know How to Hang On T-shirt. When she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him to herself for a quick good luck kiss, Knox just wanted to shake his head.

He should probably hightail it out of the Tent-o’-Trouble and back to his room at the Hyatt where he could take a shower and whisk off the grime that seemed to hover in the air.

Not that Knox didn’t savor a good rodeo, with bareback riding, bulldogging, tie-down roping, barrel racing, and maybe even good old-fashioned mutton bustin’. But NBR-X had taken the glitz of the sport and turned it into a rock show. National Bull Riding eXtreme, a traveling, rowdy weekend event that included a thrill-ride carnival, a craft beer tent, and a high-decibel concert to cap off every night.

And this was their yearly kickoff event. They were bringing their A game to the early March springtime weather in south Texas.

If it weren’t for Tate, Knox would have left right after Hot Pete’s performance, headed back to his hotel, and looked over the contract, ready for tomorrow’s negotiation.

The way Hot Pete bucked tonight, Knox might be able to raise the lease price with the contractor. And line up futures for the other four prime two-year-olds back in the barn in Montana at the Marshall Triple M.

Hot Pete, his prize bucking bull, was in rare form this year—poised to net even more than the \$350K in prize money that he'd earned last year. The best bull to come out of Gordo the Bonebreaker's line since Knox had pastured the champion. Gordo had his own pedigree from years in the ring, and his straws went for \$1,000 a pop. Hot Pete's stats boded well for the future of the Marshall Triple M.

Not that any of Knox's siblings seemed to care. In the last three years since his oldest brother, Reuben, had come back home, made peace with the family, and decided to give Knox his blessing, the rest of the family—his other three brothers and two sisters—had drifted away. Honestly, Coco wasn't a birth sister, but she felt like one, the way she'd merged into their family after her mother's death, so she also counted. But she'd drifted, just like the rest of them.

Knox was losing them to places and futures unknown, and he hadn't a clue how to knit them back together. Hold on to the legacy his father had mantled upon him.

*Family first. Family strong.*

So, of course, when he'd pulled into San Antonio, he'd texted his brother. Yes, Tate was still working security. Yes, he'd meet him after hours for a beer to catch up.

And yes, his next-youngest brother hadn't changed a bit—trouble coursed through his veins and pulled everyone in his vortex with him.

Knox stepped up to the circle. The organizers of the crazy bull riding gimmick had added real longhorns, with blunted ends, and the hairy red hide of a Braford bull, hopefully engineered, although Knox doubted it. It looked dangerous enough, if Tate were to fly over the horns, get hooked.

The guy could just as easily dislocate his shoulder not to mention land on his head and get a concussion. Or even worse—break his neck.

For all the malarkey...

Tate slid onto the bull's back, one hand gripped into the leather strap. If he'd been straddling a real bull, he'd wrap the bull rope around the chest and over the shoulders of the bull, slip his hand under the rope, and wrap the loose end of the rope once around his hand. Knox saw his own actions in his mind, breathing instructions to Tate.

Scooch your body up, until your hand is between your upper thighs. Position your feet forward, above the rope, and grip the bull's body with your spurs. Except, Tate wore no spurs, and the body had no give. No breathing from the animal, no snorting, no shaking of his angry head.

Tate lifted his hand and stuck his chest out. Nodded.

The bull began to shift.

From here, it was all instinct. Feeling the animal, getting over its front end when he reared. Keeping your backside down when he kicked up his hind legs. Using your spurs to hold on.

Tate gripped the machine with his boots, his body rocking forward, back, twisting as the bull spun. In one quick second the machine went from a rocking twist to a full-out thrashing, jerking Tate hard, forward, back, simulating a spin, then another rear—

Tate flew over the horns.

He landed with a breath-clearing whump into the straw, lying dazed for a moment before he scrambled to his feet.

Knox hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath, white-gripping the railing until Tate raised his hat above his head, waving to the crowd.

Six point four seconds. Not terrible, but he wouldn't win any awards. Tate's gaze landed on Knox and he grinned, as if he'd ridden Gordo into a championship spot at the NBR-X finals. And the blonde in the ring only added to the fuss. She grabbed Tate's shirt and gave him another full-on mouth kiss.

Disgusting.

Tate wrapped his arms around her and dipped her.

Knox was out of here. His crazy brother hadn't changed a bit since he'd left home on his Kawasaki and not looked back.

Maybe Knox hadn't a prayer of figuring out how to bring the family back together again. They were happily living their own lives.

Leaving Knox to carry on a legacy he didn't want.

He was pushing his way through the crowd when a hand caught him on the arm. He turned.

"Where'ya going?" Tate bore a smudge on his chin from his close encounter with the earth. "Your turn to ride. You know you want to. And the pot's up over 1G!"

Tate must've stuffed a C-note into the collective pot to ride—winner of the eight seconds takes all.

"I don't think so," Knox said, watching a skinny kid barely over twenty-one climb onto the back of the machine.

Tate slapped a hand on his shoulder. "If anyone can stay on that toy, it's you, Knox. None of these other yahoos won the national junior bull riding championship."

"That was a long time ago," Knox said, glancing at the kid in the ring, now spinning off the machine. Two whopping seconds. He earned a few boos. "Besides, I have work to do."

"You're always working—loosen up, bro. Live a little."

He considered Tate. The man had inherited their mother's blue eyes and her easy smile, but the renegade attitude was all Marshall genes. It seemed everyone but Knox had answered the call of the wild—big brother Reuben into smokejumping, Tate into personal security, Wyatt, the hockey star, Ford into the Navy, and Ruby Jane turning travel agent and seeing the world. Even Coco—or rather, Katya—had returned to her father's country, Russia, to work as a diplomatic aid.

And it wasn't that Knox didn't hear the call...but someone had to keep the ranch running. Pay the bills.

Take care of Mom.

And sure, he'd been primally focused on getting their bucking bull line into the national limelight, but he'd taken their 9,000-acre ranch from the edge of bankruptcy to flush and more. But apparently, while he was digging the family out of the red, they'd abandoned him for greener pastures.

"Just one beer, bro. A little catch-up time. I need the dirt on this guy who Mom is dating."

Knox stared at him, his gut emptying. “What—?”

Tate’s mouth opened a little. “Um...oh. She didn’t tell you yet.”

Perfect. Now Tate—tattooed, renegade, runaway Tate—knew more about their mother’s life than the son she lived with.

“Who is he?”

Tate was pulling him toward the bar. Gestured to the busy guy behind the counter and held up a peace sign. He turned to Knox. “Hardwin Colt.”

Aw, no... Knox grimaced. “He bought the Double Arrow from the Lindseys a few years ago. Really? Mom said she’s *dating* him?”

Tate lifted a shoulder and turned to the bar to retrieve their drinks.

Knox was tired of standing on the sidelines, watching everyone else spread their wings. Live the life they’d dreamed about.

He cast another look at the bull machine.

His gaze snagged on a brunette standing at the bar. He might not have even noticed her—she wasn’t necessarily trying to grab attention in her baggy jeans, Converse tennis shoes, an oversized gray shirt tucked into the front of her jeans. She wore her dark, shimmery hair back in a ponytail, a cap on her head, and no makeup. As if she might be in hiding.

Or worse, about to bolt. She wore the skittish look of a newborn calf as she tucked her lip between her teeth and eyed a couple cowboys leaning against the bar who’d noticed her too.

Knox didn’t like the way their gazes ran over her, but he wasn’t her keeper.

Still, he couldn’t help but watch as she stepped up to the bar, nudging between the two men. One of them had a bright orange tattoo of flames that encircled his neck. She glanced at one, then the other, her mouth a tight line, then pulled out her wallet. The bartender retrieved a bag from along the back wall—ah, takeout of some kind.

“Here you go, bro,” Tate said and handed Knox his beer. “Sorry to be the one to spill about Mom. She called to see if I was coming back for her big six-oh bash.”

Right. She’d been peppering Knox about that party since her last birthday. “She’s hoping Ford can get leave—”

“Do SEALs get time off?” Tate took a sip. “And Wyatt is in the middle of his schedule. And who knows where Ruby Jane is—last time I talked to her, she was headed to Prague—”

Someone bumped him from behind, and he sloshed beer over his cup, onto Knox, who stepped back, avoiding a drenching.

“Don’t touch me!”

The voice behind Tate caught Knox and he turned, finding the source.

The brunette. She was untangling herself from the grasp of one of the cowboys, her pale blue eyes wide, jerking away from him.

It ignited something primal and dark inside Knox, and he started toward her without thinking.

Tate grabbed him by the shirt— “Watch out!” He pointed to the scattering of greasy chicken wings soaking up the sawdusted floor of the tent.

And Knox wasn’t certain what happened, but the climatic ending included her jerking hard away from the cowboy’s grasp, turning, and fleeing through the crowd.

Knox met the eyes of her assailant, a man with gauged ears, an eyebrow bar and a port-wine stain curling up his neck, and Knox must have worn something dark in his expression because the man held up his hands. “She tripped. I caught her.”

“I’ll bet you did,” Knox snapped, his gaze searching for her, but she’d vanished.

“She left her wallet,” said the bartender, holding up the black clutch.

And before Cowboy could reach for it, Knox grabbed it.

Without a backward glance at Tate, he pushed through the crowd and out into the night.

Overhead, stars gathered like spectators to the balmy Texas night, the sounds of the nearby carnival in distant exhilaration, the tall Ferris wheel glimmering against the rodeo grounds. Neon green lit up the path that led to the red-splashed stock barn.

He spotted her, quick walking down the path.

“Stop! You dropped your wallet!”

She didn’t turn. Instead, of all things, she took off in a run.

What the—

And he didn’t think it through, just reacted, sprinting after her.

Maybe she hadn’t heard him.

She cut a right at the path that ran between the stock barn and the massive beer tent, toward a parking lot filled with RVs, horse trailers, semis, and cargo trucks. The pathway, out of the splash way of lights, darkened, and he barely made out the shadows as she—

Ducked into the stock barn?

He hitched up his pace and entered at the far end of the building. The earthy smell of animal sweat, waste, and green hay swept over him as he stepped into the shadowed building. Pens for sheep lined one wall, and horses slept in open stalls that formed corridors throughout the building.

He angled toward the door where she’d entered—the bull pens. With heavy breathing, the bulk of the massive animals seemed to saturate the expanse as he quick walked down the aisle.

What was she doing in here?

His memory brought him down the aisle that held the Brafordts. Specialized for the sport of bull riding, the monsters of the ring. Dangerous, even lethal.

And this aisle dead-ended at the most dangerous beast of them all, his own Hot Pete.

He spotted her against the far wall.

She turned, and even from here, saw her eyes widen as they fell on him. She began to back up.

No. Knox held up his hand. “Don’t move.”

But before he could stop her, she landed at the gate. It rattled.

Movement stirred from the depths of the pen.

And the woman opened her mouth to scream.

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**Get Knox!**