

Cowboy's Delight

By Luke Bandy

Trying to get your girlfriend back will make a person do crazy things. That's why Carl found himself dressed as a cowboy with his two best friends. Ryan and Derrick watched him as he paced back and forth like a ping pong ball.

"Dude, you need to chill out," Ryan told him. "You're going to wear the ground out."

Carl didn't stop as he gave Ryan a sharp look. Ryan had his feet propped up on a neighboring chair as he ate an apple. He'd look like a proper Spaghetti Western gunslinger if it weren't for the fact he was Korean. Ryan was born in Seoul, but his family moved to a suburb in South Carolina when he was five.

Derrick was laying down on the bench with his cowboy hat covering his face. He'd been laying there like that for most of the night. Nothing phased Derrick. He was bulletproof.

It drove Carl crazy that his friends weren't worried.

"How can you two be so relaxed?"

"It's not our girlfriend," Derrick said from under his hat.

"Ex-girlfriend," Ryan corrected between bites. The apple crunched under his teeth. It made Carl want to grab it and chuck it through the window, but there was no window in this room. The

three of them were hiding in the back waiting for Trent. They need Trent to perform, but Trent was MIA.

"What are we going to do if he doesn't show?" Carl cried.

The roar of a cheering crowd came from the other room. An announcer hyped up the audience.

"You guys ready for some more country?" his question blared from the speakers.

A unison shout proclaimed they wanted more country.

"Our next act is a group of lovely ladies from Fallswater. Give it up for the Mason Dixon Lilies!"

Carl's stomach sank as the band started their set.

"We're next," Carl whispered.

"Okay, so we need a plan B." Ryan nodded and tossed his apple core in the trash.

A cell phone rattled on a nearby table, sounding like a dying lawnmower. Without moving his hat, Derrick reached out and answered the phone.

"Yo," he said into it.

Carl and Ryan watched Derrick listening. From under the hat, they heard the occasional "uh-hu" or "yeah." Derrick said bye and laid the phone back on the table. The call only lasted a couple of minutes, but it felt like an eternity to Carl.

They waited for Derrick to say something, but he remained quiet. For a moment, Carl thought Derrick might actually be asleep.

"So?" Carl urged.

"Trent can't make it. He got an offer to open for Florida County Line tomorrow. So, he's getting on a plane."

"What?" Carl's head felt like an angry beehive.

They could hear the Mason Dixon Lilies sing their first song.

*I heard he's got a Prius, 'cause he's into bein' green
My buddies said he saw ya'll, eatin' that sushi stuff
Baby that don't sound like you, that don't sound like love,
sounds like it sucks...*

"Country has the worst lyrics," Ryan commented.

"Really?" Carl questioned. "That's your first thought to this news. We lost Trent. We have no act."

"Okay," Ryan apologized. "Let me think."

Carl's plan to win back Jenna was falling to pieces. She left him last month for Cody Peters. Carl knew it was because he was in a band. A country music band and Carl knew nothing about country music.

His lack of country knowledge wasn't because Carl was black, either. Carl did favor hip-hop, but that was a coincidence. All three of them lived in the suburbs and happened to be huge hip-hop fans. It was the thing that bonded the three of them together growing up. Being the only three guys in class that knew who Tu Pac and Biggie was strange for South Carolina. It made them different.

It was progressive that Jenna would even date Carl. A black guy and a white girl dancing at the high school prom received a lot of dirty looks. But for the most part, they didn't have to worry. A lot of gossip behind their backs, but Carl could handle that.

"We could just go home," Derrick suggested.

"No!" Carl snapped. Ryan raised his eyebrows at him.

"Sorry, but I can't give up now."

"I mean if you sit this one out," Ryan said. "you can try something else down the road. Something less elaborate like flowers."

"Are you kidding me? Did you see Cody Peter's set? The crowd went nuts for him."

"Yeah they did," Derrick commented. He hadn't moved an inch. "I still don't get country."

"At least with Trent I could outperform Cody. Prove myself to her."

"Why do all of this for Jenna, though?" Ryan pleaded.

"Because I love her!"

When Carl heard himself say that he winced. Sometimes he wished he didn't feel the way he did about Jenna. So many people wanted him to move on but losing her made him irrational. Carl wasn't sure what do without her after being together for all high school and some of college.

Deep inside he wanted to free for her spell but couldn't seem to break it. He was stuck with a plagued mind. He needed to get Jenna back.

He knew that she left him because he never took an interest in what she was into. She wanted Carl to take her to the state fair and see Luke Bryan. But Carl didn't want to go. That's where she met Cody.

Carl gritted his teeth and clenched his fist. Every time he thought of Cody Peters he saw red. He was like Michelangelo's David raised on a farm. The perfect redneck. Of course, Jenna and Cody hit it off. She always had a thing for the cowboy type.

The Mason Dixon Lilies played another song. Carl was running out of time.

*You lie like a priceless Persian rug on
a rich man's floor
and you lie like a coon dog basking*

in the sunshine on my porch
Well you lie like a penny in a parking
lot at the grocery store

"Did she just say coon dog?" Ryan asked.

"Come on guys," Carl pushed. "We can come up with something."

"But for Jenna?" Derrick asked. "You guys haven't gotten along in a long time."

"We got along fine," Carl argued. He knew it wasn't true, but he knew things would go back to normal when they were back together.

"Listen," Ryan stated. "We love you. We followed you down this rabbit hole for three months. I even learned the drums. I'm Asian. That was really hard for me."

Trent put them through endless practices to prepare for The Rusty Waterhole's annual open mic. The winner got a recording contract with the local radio station.

Jenna went every year. She dreamed of being a country star but didn't have a musical bone in her body. Carl found it adorable when he caught her singing. Somehow, she made country music sound even worse.

Cody Peters was a shoe-in for the competition. Derrick's older stepbrother was a country musician, too though. Carl new

nothing about country, but Trent had made himself a name on his college campus in Texas. So, while Trent was back for his break, Carl convinced him to make a band with the three of them.

Trent laughed at first, but he must have found Carl's passion endearing. Everyone thought the idea was ridiculous but was still willing to give it a shot. Trent wouldn't turn down a chance at a recording opportunity. Derrick already knew the guitar. Carl picked up the bass quick, and despite Ryan's clunkiness on the drums, he still figured it out.

The Mason Dixon Lilies sang their last song.

*I ain't much for mowin' thick grass
I'm too slow for workin' too fast
I don't do windows so honey don't ask
But I'm pretty good at drinkin' beer."*

"Seriously, Carl" Ryan shook his head. "I don't know how you talked us into this."

"I'd do the same for you guys," Carl attested.

"The next time one of us has their girlfriend stolen from them, I'll remember you said that," Derrick said.

"What are we going to do?" Carl panicked. "Trent sings all the songs. Does anyone even know the lyrics?"

"No. But we do know the lyrics to something else," Derrick sat up causing his hat to drop to the floor. "Rapper's Delight."

Derrick smiled like he had uttered the greatest two words ever.

"You're kidding right?" Carl asked him.

"Why not?" Derrick looked at his friends. "You guys remember it, right?"

"Of course," Ryan assured. "We practiced it every day for a whole year to get it right. The look on the faces was priceless."

"That was a high school talent show, though. This a packed bar full of white trash and red necks. And you want to perform a fourteen-minute rap song?" Carl pointed at the door, where The Mason Dixon Lilies were finishing their set.

"Why not?"

"We look like a poster for affirmative action." Carl pointed back forth between him and Ryan.

"Well, I'm white," Derrick proposed. "I mean, I'm Jewish, so it should be fine."

"Yeah, one-third white should be good enough not to start a riot," Ryan stated.

"No, it is not good enough. Trent was going to be the spotlight for everything. This is completely different," Carl argued.

"Do you want Jenna back?" Ryan asked him.

"Of course," Carl told him, but the confidence in his voice had faded. "More than anything."

"Then this is your chance to prove that you'll do anything for her," Ryan explained.

Carl knew that his friends weren't doing this for him. They wanted to stir the pot. That's why they learned Rapper's Delight in the first place. They knew everyone at the school hated hip-hop. In the suburbs of South Carolina, everyone cringed at the sound of rap.

Rapper's Delight was mild compared to today's hip-hop, though. The epic song recorded by The Sugar Hill Gang helped launch rap as a genre. The song was three guys speaking about their lives. They didn't even know each other before a producer found them and had them record together.

The song fitted Carl and his friends. Three guys that are a bit off from the norm, but not so off that they stood out. They had a lot to say, and Rapper's Delight was a way to get their voice heard. After they graduated high school, they made a social media splash in the area. Videos of them performing would still pop up on Carl's feed.

"So?" Derrick awaited Carl's answer.

Carl imagined they'd be booed off the stage. That would kill any hope of getting Jenna back. Also, there was the off

chance of getting beat up in the parking lot afterward. He didn't think that was likely but being the one black guy in a sea of white people still made him nervous. Without Trent, he'd be front and center.

"And our next act is a young man that's been having some success lately. Trent Yampolsky!" the announcer said.

"My brother desperately needs a stage name," Derrick commented.

Carl broke out into a cold sweat right before he cracked the door to see the crowd. Everyone waited for Trent to take the stage. People started to search around for him. The announcer looked to the back where the acts waited.

"Um, Trent Yampolsky," the announcer said again like Trent may not have heard him.

Then Carl saw her. Jenna stood in the crowd. Cody Peters' arm wrapped around her waist. Carl made eye contact with her through the cracked door. She furrowed her brow, and he slammed the door.

"Let's do it," Carl told his friends.

The three of them adjusted their cowboy hats, took a deep breath, and stepped out the door.

They received curious looks as they made their way up the stage. Carl's heart dropped when he saw all the eyes staring up

at them. His armpits pooled with perspiration. Carl prayed he didn't leak through his shirt.

"What's going on fellas?" the announcer asked away from the mic.

"Change of plans," Ryan said and handed the announcer his phone. "Can we get this pumped through the speakers?"

"Where's Trent?" asked the announcer.

"He's unavailable. We're his replacements," Derrick explained.

The announcer nodded as he processed the news.

"Rapper's Delight?" the announcer read off the phone. "Is that your name?"

The three friends could hear the irritation in the announcer's voice. Carl had a flight or fight moment and tried to run off the stage. But his muscles were so tense he found himself frozen in place, but he found the courage to speak.

"Um, it should say Cowboy's Delight. We're changing genres," Carl explained.

The announcer raised an eyebrow, but he seemed to accept Carl's reason.

"And you just need the backing track?" he asked.

The three friends look at each other, then back at him and nodded.

"Okay, fellas. Best of luck to you." The announcer might have well of said, *Don't get yourselves killed*. He brought the mic back up to his face. "Folks, there's been a bit of a change. Trent can't make it."

A chorus of boos bombarded the three friends. The announcer motioned the crowd to calm down.

"Now, I know you're disappointed, but we have a surprise act. These three boys are Cowboy's Delight."

One lone clap came from somewhere in the room. Carl swallowed hard. Deep inside he hoped the lone clapper was Jenna.

The announcer left the stage with Ryan's phone. The three friends hunted for microphones. Ryan took the announcer's mic.

"Testing," he spoke into it. *Testing* boomed like a freight train creating massive feedback. The crowd covered their eyes. Murmuring from the crowd caused Carl to regret letting his friends talk him into this.

When Derrick and Carl found mics, they tapped on the tops to see if they were on. No feedback this time. They awaited the start of their song. People looked daggers at them, disappointed that they weren't Trent. The friends stood like mannequins disapplying bad rodeo clothing.

Their track started playing. The light tapping of percussion and deep piano intro. Then the bassline rolled in. Carl watched the audience try to figure out what was happening.

Ryan took an anxious breath and started the song.

*I said a hip, hop, a hippie to the hippie
to the hip hip hop, you don't stop
the rockin' to the bang bang boogie say up jumps the boogie
to the rhythm of the boogity beat*

Carl could feel the confusion in the room. He imagined how this sounded like nonsense to the country crowd looking up at them. His heart thundered in his chest as he awaited his cue. Carl's jaw was so tight he thought his teeth might shatter. He wished he could relax like the time they performed for the school.

*Well, so far you've heard my voice, but I brought two
friends along
And next on the mic is my man Carl
Come on, Carl, sing that song*

Time slowed, and the mic felt like a dead weight. Carl struggled to bring it to his mouth, but he managed to rap his first line.

Check it out, I'm the C-A-S-AN-the-O-V-A

and the rest is F-L-Y

Carl surprised himself. He pulled it off without missing a beat. It was like riding a bike. The song seemed to slip on like an old glove. Still, his feet were nailed to the floor. His nerves prevented him from moving.

*You see I'm five foot eight and I'm lots of fun
and I dress to a 'T'*

They changed a lot of the lyrics to match them. Big Bank Hank sang Carl's section, who raps that he's six foot one and a ton of fun. Well, Carl wasn't that big, so the line changed.

Carl kept up his first section and avoided any mistakes. He waited for jeers from the crowd or a beer bottle thrown at his head. Nothing happened, though. Carl tried to gauge the audience's reaction, but he couldn't see past the stage lights.

*Everybody go, hotel, motel, Holiday Inn
Say if your girl starts actin' up, then you take her friend
Master D, am I mellow?
It's on you, so what you gonna do?*

Master D was Derrick. Carl managed to point to him as

Derrick took over his part. It was the only movement Carl had made since he started. Derrick didn't have any problem moving around, though. The second he started, he grooved across the stage like they did for the talent show.

I said M-A-S, T-E-R, a D with a double E

*I said I go by the unforgettable name of the man they call
the Master Dee*

More changed lyrics to match the first letter of Derrick's name. Derrick rapped with confidence. He bent to the crowd and bopped his shoulders to the beat. It was like he forgot that he looked like a cowboy.

*Ya start poppin' ya fingers and stompin' your feet
and movin' your body while you're sittin' in your seat*

Derrick didn't miss any of the old choreography. That confidence seemed to spread to Ryan as Ryan started to clap above his head and move about the stage. Now Carl stood out because he still couldn't manage to budge.

*I said 1-2-3-4, tell me Wonder Ry what are you waitin'
for?*

The next transfer cued. Ryan danced to center stage, with doubled energy than he had before.

skiddlee beebop we rock a Scoobie-Doo

And guess what America we love you

Ryan put an extra emphasis on America. Smart move considering the venue. These people bled red, white, and blue.

As Ryan rapped, Carl fought his muscles to move. He managed to get his upper body to flow with the music, but he needed to be able to jump to the center stage.

That's when he heard something curious. Clapping. He thought it was coming from Derrick. But Carl saw he was doing some type of impromptu country line-dance break-dance hybrid. It was the audience that was clapping.

I know a man named Carl

He has more rhymes that are a serious draw

So come on, Carl sing that song

to the rhythm of the boogie da bang bang da bong

Before Carl began again, he closed his eyes and imagined Jenna. Then infused by the energy of the crowd, Carl stepped

forward to the center stage. He bounced to the rhythm as he spoke.

*Well, I'm imp, the dimp, the ladies pimp
The women fight for my delight
But I'm the grandmaster with the three MCs
that shock the house for the young ladies*

For the next three minutes, Carl rapped about his sexual exploits. None of them were true, but he said each word like it was true. He couldn't tell if people were picking up on what he was singing about, but the clapping continued.

*I say skip, dive, what can I say
I can't fit em all inside my O.J.
so I just take half and bust them out
I give the rest to Master Dee so he could shock the house*

Carl and Derrick high fived with a loud smack. Only they could hear it over the backtrack, though. It sounded turned up because the crowd had gotten so loud. Carl swore he heard a yee-ha as Derrick took over.

Derrick had them eating out of his hands. The crowd acted disappointed when Ryan came back to center stage. But Ryan knew what words to punch harder than the rest.

Like a can of beer that's sweeter than honey

Like a millionaire that has no money

Ryan screamed beer and created a roar of cheers. The place went bananas. Carl knew he heard a yee-haw or two at this point. The song hit the ten-minute mark. That meant Carl's last section was coming up. He wanted to make it count.

I say Carl? Can ya rock?

Can you rock to the rhythm that just don't stop?

Can you hip me to the shoobie doo?

I said come on make the make the people move

Carl got a running start and front flipped to center stage. He hadn't practiced it in a while and thanked God he didn't crack his head open. The woots were deafening. Eating up the crowd's reaction, Carl went into his lines without a flaw.

There was nothing else like it. Carl felt like he conquered the world. Jenna had slipped to the back of his mind. On the stage of The Rusty Waterhole, he became bigger than someone who

wanted his girlfriend back. He became a short-term king, co-ruling with his two closest friends.

*cause I'm a helluva man when I'm on the mic
I am the definite feast delight
cause I'm a helluva man when I'm on the mic
I am the definite feast delight*

The three friends finished the song in unison. The backtrack faded and the audience exploded with applause.

"I don't know what that was, but it was cool as shit," someone screamed from the front.

Carl ran around the stage so much he worked up a massive sweat through his shirt. Derrick wiped his forehead with his sleeve. Ryan bowed to the crowd, his Korean heritage coming through.

"Well, that was no Trent Yampolsky, but that it was still something. Let's hear it for Cowboy's Delight."

The crowd's ovation rejuvenated as the three friends left the stage. The next few hours were a bit of a blur. Guys with deep southern accents bought Carl beer, after beer. The other acts went on to their own fanfare. Somehow Cowboy's Delight was now a dark horse contender to win the competition.

The last act went on but didn't leave an impression. Carl lost Derrick and Ryan ages ago. Different groups of good 'ol boys had dragged them in different directions. Carl remembered a conversation about trucks and not being able to contribute. Part because he didn't care about trucks and part because his head swirled from the alcohol.

"Okay, so the results are in," the announcer said.

Carl searched the room for his friends. As he looked, he met eyes with Jenna. They held glances for a moment, then she turned. Carl attempted to decipher her look with his drunk brain.

"The winner is Cody Banks!" The announcer started to applaud but stopped as the crowd booed. Cody took the stage like a scared cat. People chanted "Cowboy's Delight! Cowboy's Delight!". Derrick and Ryan came up behind Carl.

"Can you believe this?" Ryan yelled over the crowd.

Carl shook his head.

"This is still a *country* music competition," the announcer explained. "A country singer needs to win."

The people continued chanting their name. The three friends grinned like they caused world peace. Cody backed into a corner of the stage as the announcer tried to quiet the crowd.

Jenna emerged from the chanting audience. She marched straight up to Carl.

"Why are you even here? You've ruined this for Cody," she shouted over the crowd. Carl suspected she would have shouted at him either way.

"I thought you'd like me taking an interest in what you liked," Carl told her.

"This is more than taking an interest. It's nuts. Not cool."

"According to everyone's reaction, it is cool," Derrick smirked as a group of blondes raised their beers to him.

"So, congratulations to Cody Banks." The announcer decided to ignore the chants. He shook Cody's hand and presented him with the prize. "Everyone, enjoy the rest of your night."

Carl laughed as the Cowboy Delight chants continued. Jenna glared at him.

"This is why we broke up, Carl," Jenna screamed. "We are just too different. No normal person would do what you did."

And with those words, Carl felt free. The infatuation no longer plagued him. He saw that being Jenna's boyfriend didn't define him.

Derrick and Ryan had a circle of whooping fans circled around them. The place exploded with encore chants. His friends shrugged their shoulders at Carl and made their way back to the stage.

"Yeah, I guess I am crazy." Carl kissed Jenna on the forehead. "Sorry I did this. I have an encore to perform."

Carl dashed back on stage to meet his friends. He saw Cody and Jenna looking up at him like sad puppies, but he couldn't worry about that. He had a song to perform.

Their track started playing, again. The light tapping of percussion and deep piano intro. Then the bassline rolled in.