

A close-up photograph of a man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a denim shirt, looking down at a baby wrapped in a teal blanket. The scene is set outdoors with a blurred background of a sunset or sunrise. A pink and purple gradient banner is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

FORTUNE'S
SECRET BABY

CHRISTYNE BUTLER

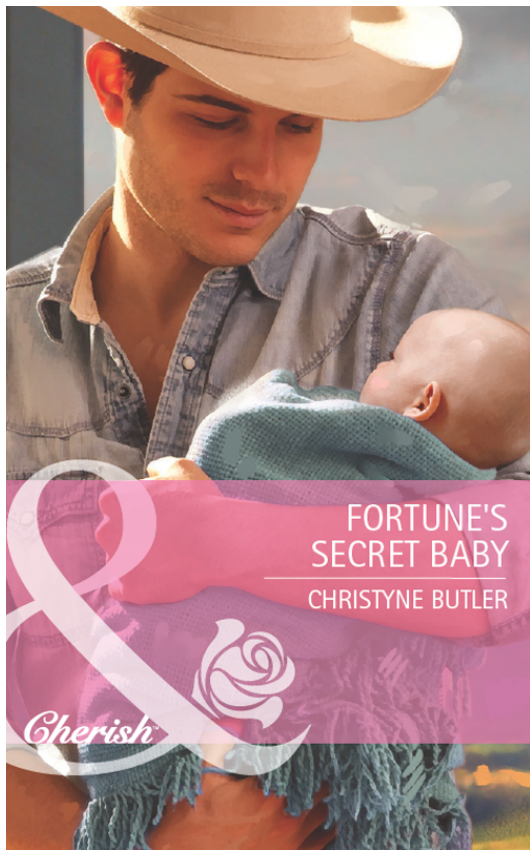
Cherish



Christyne Butler
Fortune's Secret Baby

Содержание

About the Author	7
Fortune's	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	28
Chapter Three	41
Chapter Four	58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	61



FORTUNE'S
SECRET BABY

CHRISTYNE BUTLER

Cherish

“Don’t get dressed on my account.”

Kelsey looked up.

No clean shirt, no baby. Just one hundred percent, mouth-watering—cowboy.

“Cooper.”

He crossed the room in a heartbeat, swore softly under his breath before his mouth captured hers in a searing kiss.

Kelsey wound her hands around his neck, meeting his kiss head-on, pressing her curves to the hard planes of his chest. His hands brushed her sweat jacket from her shoulders. He broke free of her mouth, his lips moving along her jaw until he nipped at her ear.

“I wasn’t going to do this,” he whispered hotly, “but you said my name ...”

Dear Reader,

As a fan of the many sagas of the Fortune family over the years, I was thrilled when, as a relatively new author, I was asked to be part of the LOST ... AND FOUND continuity. When I read the outline for my book, my first thought was “Oh, a baby changes everything” and little Anthony certainly does that for Cooper Fortune.

There’s a saying that goes something like “Becoming a parent is a decision to forever have your heart go walking around outside your body.” Something this wandering cowboy—who suddenly finds himself a father—never experienced before his son came into his life. Add a chance meeting with a pretty horse trainer and Cooper’s world is about to be changed in ways he never dreamed of.

It was such fun to be with Cooper and Kelsey as they found their way to each other and their happily ever after. I hope you

enjoy their journey!

Happy reading!

Christyne

About the Author

CHRISTYNE BUTLER fell in love with romance novels while serving in the United States Navy and started writing her own stories six years ago. She considers selling to Cherish™ a dream come true and enjoys writing contemporary romances full of life, love, a hint of laughter and perhaps a dash of danger, too. And there has to be a happily-ever-after or she's just not satisfied.

She lives with her family in central Massachusetts and loves to hear from her readers at chris@christynebutler.com. Or visit her website at www.christynebutler.com.

Fortune's Secret Baby Christyne Butler



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To the terrific writers I worked with on this continuity:
Allison Leigh, Judy Duarte, Susan Crosby, Marie
Ferrarella and Victoria Pade,
and Susan Litman ...
the editor who brought us all together!

Chapter One

Thirteen steps.

The length of the baby's room, from the crib near the bay window to the doorway at the opposite corner, could be covered in thirteen steps.

Cooper Fortune had been counting, repeatedly, for the last interminably long twenty minutes while the squirming five-month-old in his arms wailed loud enough to wake the dead.

Anthony, middle name still unknown, Fortune. His son. A child he'd only known existed for the last week and a half.

Probability of paternity = 99.99%.

That's what the laboratory had told him when they'd called with the results and in the blink of an eye, Cooper Fortune—wandering cowboy—had a child.

“Looks like you lost the parent lottery.” Cooper spoke above the baby's cries as he paced the small room, cradling the flailing infant against his chest. “Welcome to the club, buddy. My folks were lousy, too.”

He had no memory of his father, and Cooper's mother, Cindy Fortune, a former showgirl and wannabe socialite, easily held the number-one spot on the list of worst mothers in the history of the world.

“Of course, we still don't know what happened to *your* mama,” Cooper continued, noticing the decibel level of the

baby's cries, not to mention the wiggle factor, had lessened as soon as he started talking. "But your Uncle Ross is on the case and I'm sure he'll find her soon. I wish I knew why she left you and how the hel—heck you ended up here in Red Rock."

And why Lulu never bothered to tell him she was pregnant.

He'd met Lulu Carlton at a local bar about a year and a half ago while working on a ranch in Rock Country, Minnesota. They dated for about six months, but when Cooper's job ended, so had the relationship. Anthony's estimated birth date was around the middle of December, which meant the child was conceived just before Cooper hightailed it out of Minnesota early last year.

And didn't that make him feel like a loser?

As he stared down at the little bundle looking up at him with a curious gaze from familiar dark brown eyes, Cooper had no idea what to do next.

"This isn't working out too well, huh, partner? We haven't exactly had much one-on-one time, until tonight. And usually you're a bit quieter."

Cooper watched the baby rub at his eyes with tiny fists. The crying lowered to a soft whimpering for a moment. Could the pacing and talking actually be working?

He slowly headed for the crib. Maybe he could get back downstairs before the end of the Red Sox/Rangers game he'd been watching in between reading a book that promised to tell him everything he needed to know about dealing with a baby. He leaned over the railing, making sure to support Anthony's head

like he'd seen Kirsten do numerous times, but the moment the kid went horizontal, the screams returned.

“Okay, so you're not ready to concede.” Cooper gathered the baby to his chest and started walking again, patting Anthony gently on his back. “Boy, you got some lungs on you. I don't recollect you putting up this much of a fuss before.”

Cooper had slept in the spare bedroom downstairs for three nights before he'd heard a peep out of the kid after bedtime. At first he hadn't known what the noise was. Heck, it sounded a bit like a baby calf bellowing for its mama.

“But by the time I hightailed it up here, Miss Kirsten already had things taken care of, huh? Not tonight, though. Tonight, it's just you and me—”

“What's going on? Is he okay?”

He turned toward the feminine voice. His cousin's fiancée, Kirsten Allen, stood at the doorway. When Anthony let loose another howl, she crossed the room in a heartbeat and reached for the baby.

And Cooper let her take him.

His first instinct had been to keep hold of his son, but Anthony had stuck out his little arms for the petite brunette as soon as he saw her.

“Oh, sweetie, what's all this crying about?” Kirsten cooed as she held the child close. “It's okay now, I've got you.”

Cooper crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the pang in his heart at her words.

“He’s been bawling like that for close to a half hour now,” he said when she looked at him. “He calmed down some, but I guess that was just a rest before he revved up again.”

“Is he wet? Did you check his diaper?”

Diaper?

Damn! Cooper let his silence answer her.

Kirsten walked to the changing table and laid Anthony down on the padded cushion. “What about a bottle?” she asked, her tone softer, matching Anthony’s now-quiet fussing while making quick work of changing the baby. “It’s been a few hours since he last ate. Did you make up a bottle for him from the formula we left on the kitchen counter?”

Strike two. The thought of a bottle never crossed his mind. “I’ll go get one now.”

She paused in closing up a fresh diaper on the baby to look at him. “Cooper, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound so—”

“Don’t worry about it.” He waved off her apology and headed for the doorway. “Be back in a minute.”

Seconds later, he walked into the kitchen but stopped at the sight of his cousin, Jeremy Fortune, a can of powdered formula and jug of filtered water in front of him, mixing up a bottle.

Cooper leaned against the door frame and fought not to react to the unnamed emotion bubbling up inside him at the sight of the doctor who looked so at ease fixing a meal for *his* son.

But life in general was easy for his cousin; being one of the *good* Fortunes made it so for him and his four brothers, all

of whom had found success, both professionally and in their personal lives. Cooper and his siblings had never had it easy despite sharing the Fortune name, a name that carried a lot of respect and admiration, not only in Red Rock, but all of Texas.

Then again, Cooper's brother, Ross, and their sister, Frannie, both had finally found happiness and love over the last year and his other brother, Flint, had made a name for himself as a fine arts dealer.

So where did that leave him?

Up until a couple of weeks ago, he'd lived a good life with a few simple guidelines: Always do the best job you can. A healthy bank account was more important than material belongings. Avoid stepping on another man's toes where the ladies were concerned.

And no putting down roots. Better to be a rolling stone than a moss-covered rock stuck in one place. That last one led easily to the most important rule of all.

Never marry or have kids.

No sense getting involved when his personal history made it clear he was never going to be any good at it. Being a wandering cowboy, moving from ranch to ranch, job to job, came as natural to him as breathing.

Happily ever after? Not for him.

Scrubbing his face with his hand, Cooper pulled his mind from the past to deal with the here and now. He wasn't angry, at least not with Jeremy or Kirsten. They were only doing what

they knew was right for Anthony.

Was he pissed at himself for not remembering the basics Kirsten had tried to drill into his head for the last ten days? Or was it something more—a sense of defeat, of loss?

When Anthony had pulled away from him and reached for the woman who'd been taking care of him for the last four months, he felt like he'd been kicked in the gut by a wayward horse hoof.

“Ah, I guess I beat you to bottle duty.” Jeremy finally noticed Cooper standing there. “We heard Anthony crying when we walked in. I told Kirsten to let you handle things, but she lasted less than five minutes before heading upstairs. I figured having a second bottle ready to go wouldn't hurt.”

Cooper smiled, hoping for the practiced grin he'd refined back in high school that had charmed everyone from cheerleaders to the local sheriff deputies. “You figured right.”

Jeremy secured a clear plastic cap over the nipple and tossed the bottle in Cooper's direction.

He grabbed it midair. “Why don't you take it upstairs?” Cooper asked. “I figured I'd catch the end of the game.”

His cousin just shook his head. “He's your kid, Daddy.”

That was the first time someone had called him that and it hit Cooper right between the eyes. Hell, he hadn't said the word to himself yet.

“What?” Jeremy asked.

Cooper shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Look, I know this ... this whole situation is the craziest thing

we've ever had to deal with—”

“With this family?”

A slight frown slipped over Jeremy's face. “Okay, the craziest thing *you've* had to deal with since you headed out for greener pastures twenty-odd years ago, but you're doing ... You seem to be working hard at figuring everything out.”

“Yeah.”

His cousin put the jug of water into the refrigerator before turning back. “You know, finding out she wasn't Anthony's aunt was a bit of a shock for Kirsten. She and her brother believed the baby was his after his ex-girlfriend left Anthony with them.”

Cooper had already heard this crazy story.

When they'd managed to finally find the ex-girlfriend, she admitted neither she nor Kirsten's brother were the baby's true parents and that another man she was involved with gave her the baby to care for. Then the ex-girlfriend skipped town. The police were still trying to find her.

“If that gold medallion hadn't been left with Anthony,” Jeremy continued, “who knows if we would've ever connected the baby to your side of the family.”

Cooper nodded. The medallion was one of four identical coins given to him and his siblings years ago as a Christmas gift from their mother. He hadn't even realized it was missing from the inside zippered pocket of his duffle bag all these months.

“It's been hard for Kirsten, but she's happy you two have found your way to each other. She just wants what's best for everyone.

What's best for Anthony.”

And you aren't it.

The words weren't spoken, but Cooper got the message.

Loud and clear.

“Are you nuts?” Flint Fortune took a long swallow before returning his beer bottle to the table with a loud thud. “Moving out? Living alone with Anthony? You've been in the kid's life two weeks!”

Cooper ignored his younger brother and concentrated on Ross, the older one, who sat across from him in a booth at Red, a celebrated family restaurant in Red Rock. Owned by José and Maria Mendoza, Red was managed by one of their many offspring, Marcos, who'd sat the Fortune brothers in a corner booth to allow for private conversation.

Ross eyed him over the rim of his own beer, one brow raised.

“I've been thinking about this for a few days.” Cooper answered Ross's unspoken question, his thumb tracing patterns in the condensation on his glass of iced tea. “I know it's the right thing for me. And for Anthony.”

Taking a mouthful of tea to soothe his parched throat, Cooper reminded himself again why he'd sworn off alcohol the night he'd found out about his son.

There was no way his child would ever associate the stale odor of booze with a parental touch. The few times Cindy had displayed halfhearted affection to Cooper, the embrace always reeked of perfume, cigarette smoke and whatever drink she'd

chosen as her favorite cocktail of that week.

“You’ve had a rough couple of weeks. First Anthony, and then finding out Lulu had been dead all these months instead of just a runaway parent. You sure this isn’t misplaced guilt?” Ross finally asked.

“No.”

“Identifying a former girlfriend’s remains in a morgue is something I never want on my ‘to-do’ list,” Ross continued. “And giving her a proper burial yesterday was a decent thing to do.”

“Lulu didn’t have any family. I did what needed to be done. I still wish I knew why she never tried to find me.”

“Well, we guessed she came to Red Rock back in January to see you because she’d read the news about William and Lily’s wedding.” Flint shoved a forkful of fajitas and guacamole into his mouth and quickly chewed. “The forensics report did say her car accident happened around that date.”

“That still doesn’t explain how my son ended up with Kirsten’s brother’s ex-girlfriend. Unless Lulu purposely left the baby with her,” Cooper said.

“Or why Lulu didn’t try to contact you long before the baby was born,” Ross added.

“Not that you would’ve been easy to find,” Flint said. “Hell, you finally got your first cell phone a week ago. Welcome to the twenty-first century, bro.”

The device was a necessity now because of the baby, and Cooper still wasn’t used to the contraption clipped to his belt.

Still, even if he'd had a cell phone last year, would he have shared the number with Lulu?

“Lulu wasn't happy I was leaving town, but it's not like she begged me to stick around.” Cooper pushed at the food on his plate, his appetite suddenly gone. “We both made it clear from the beginning neither of us was interested in settling down. You guys know me, my life is—was—about being a cowboy, being free to go where I want, when I want. Maybe Lulu figured it was best if I wasn't in the kid's life at all.”

“But now you are.”

He let the fork drop to the plate. “Yes, and I need one-on-one time with my son if we're ever going to find our way.”

“You don't plan on leaving town, do you?” Ross asked.

Cooper shook his head. “No. Red Rock is home. The Fortunes are here and they're Anthony's family.”

“Damn right we are.”

All three brothers looked up to find JR Fortune standing at the table. The oldest of their Uncle William's five sons, JR had left a successful life in Los Angeles last year to put down roots in Red Rock. He'd purchased a local ranch, renamed it after his deceased mother and went to work restoring the land and the buildings.

“JR.” Cooper greeted his cousin as he sat next to him.

“Things a bit crowded at my brother's place?” JR asked.

Cooper nodded and quickly told the men at the table what happened two weeks ago and how he hadn't had a moment alone

with his son since. “I know I didn’t come up with the diaper or bottle answer right away that night, but I would’ve. I just never got the chance to think that far ahead.”

“Well, I have an idea that might work,” JR said. “Your stallion’s been staying at my place since you got back into town. We’ve got room for you and the baby, too.”

Cooper shook his head. The main house at his cousin’s ranch, Molly’s Pride, came with three times the square footage of Jeremy and Kirsten’s, but that wasn’t what he was looking for. “I appreciate you taking in Solo when I got to town and keeping an eye on him, but—”

“I’m not talking about staying in the hacienda with me and Isabella. There are a couple of furnished cottages on the place sitting empty. You and Anthony are welcome to one of them. It would give you two the independence it sounds like you’re looking for, but with family nearby ... just in case.”

Glancing at his brothers, Cooper watched them nod in agreement. It was a good idea. He missed being on a ranch and he missed Solo, the buckskin stallion he’d picked up outside Laramie, Wyoming, six years ago and named after his favorite movie character. The horse had quickly become his best friend.

“Okay, but only if the place is far away from your house. Anthony’s got quite a set of lungs on him and he’s not afraid to use them.”

JR chuckled then said, “That’s fine with me, but we need to get used to the idea of baby noises around the ranch. Isabella is

already decorating the nursery for our bambino.”

They sealed the agreement with a handshake and another round of beers for everyone—except Cooper, who asked for a refill on his sweetened iced tea.

As the setting sun cast a blaze of deep reds, bright oranges and soft pinks across the Texas sky, Cooper felt pretty damn proud of himself. He and Anthony were all moved into a two-bedroom stucco cottage. Ross, Jeremy and JR had helped with moving the baby furniture that Jeremy and Kirsten had insisted Cooper take with him.

Telling them about his decision had been hard, but they'd agreed it was the best idea for everyone, even as Kirsten flagged pages in his *Parenting for Dummies* book and programmed their phone numbers into his cell phone.

JR's wife, Isabella, who ran her own interior design business from the ranch, had decorated the cottage with sturdy furniture and accents of bright Southwest colors. The miniature hacienda came complete with a swing on the covered front porch, a fully stocked kitchen and bedding for the queen-size bed in the bigger of the two bedrooms. With the smaller bedroom filled with everything Anthony needed, Cooper had to admit it felt good to be on his own again.

On his own plus one.

“Time for bed, little guy,” Cooper whispered, rising from the rocking chair, the bottle releasing from the baby's mouth with a gentle pop.

It'd taken three tries to get the consistency of the bedtime bottle right, but he considered that a victory after they'd sampled a half dozen different jars of baby food before finding a flavor Anthony would eat without sending it flying through the air in disgust.

Making his way to the crib, Cooper stepped over the remains of a handful of disposable diapers on the floor. Who knew the sticky tabs on those suckers ripped off so easily? But his son was on his way to dreamland, that's all that mattered.

Laying the boy on his back, Cooper paused for a moment, awed by the tightening in his chest as he looked at his son. Unable to stop himself, he lightly touched the unbelievable softness of one chubby cheek. Anthony's fists waved in the air and Cooper backed away. Turning on the baby monitor on the nearby dresser, he grabbed the smaller handheld version and left the darkened room.

Drawn to the kitchen by the smell of freshly brewed coffee he'd made himself earlier but never got to taste, he poured a mug and paused to listen to the silence.

He wasn't used to this.

Usually he spent his evenings at a local honky-tonk, in the company of fellow cowboys with a beer in one hand and a fistful of cards in the other, or on occasion, it was just him and his horse.

Ignoring the itch to visit his friend tucked away in the main barn, Cooper turned away from the mess in the kitchen and walked into the living room. He placed the baby monitor on

the coffee table and reached for the parenting book he'd been reading for the last couple of weeks. The image of a smiling family graced the cover.

Had his father and mother ever looked at each other that way? At him? He doubted it. His father had taken off for greener pastures before Cooper had turned two, and Cindy was an indifferent parent at best.

What kind of parent had Lulu been? How had she dealt with being alone and pregnant? And what had finally driven her all this way to find him? Hadn't she wanted the baby anymore?

Sighing, he settled back in his chair and cracked open the book, his mind focused on Anthony. Less than six months old and the kid was already the ultimate story of luck gone bad—a motherless child who was now stuck with *him* for a dad.

A little while later, cries jerked Cooper out of the arms of an unknown woman in a strange but enticing dream. Stumbling out of the chair and tripping over his boots lying nearby, he raced down the short hallway to the baby's room.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and found Anthony still on his back, the angelic look gone from his face and replaced with eyes clenched tightly together and his tiny mouth letting loose an ear-piercing screech.

“Hey, buddy, what’s going on?” He reached for the baby, who continued his crying. “Geesh, you’re not a happy camper.”

First stop, the changing table. Cooper made quick work of the baby’s diaper, thankful it was only wet and not one of the

industrial-strength, poop-filled ones Anthony favored at times.

He peered at the clock and saw that it was just short of midnight. “Okay, so you must be ready for another fill-up. Good thing I’ve got another bottle cooling in the fridge, but you can tone it down any time now.”

Anthony either didn’t care or thought his daddy wasn’t moving fast enough, because the crying only increased as Cooper headed for the kitchen. His tone doubled when he saw the bottle.

“Hold on, partner. You don’t want cold cow juice.” Cooper juggled the baby with one arm while popping the bottle into the electric warmer. “Hang on just another five minutes.”

Anthony was hanging on, but not quietly. He fussed and squirmed while Cooper counted down the minutes on the warmer. Finally done, he shook the bottle and it took some maneuvering to test its contents to make sure it wasn’t too hot. Then he popped the bottle into Anthony’s waiting mouth.

The peace and quiet only lasted a few seconds.

“Easy there, you’re going to drown yourself.” Cooper pulled the bottle back as Anthony continued to cry, spitting up more of the liquid than he was taking in. “Okay, you don’t want the milk. What do you want?”

Anthony’s only answer was increased wailing.

He held the baby close to his chest and walked. Around the dining table, into the living room, down the hall and back again. He didn’t bother to count his steps this time as he gently patted Anthony on the back. Thankful for the dim glow from the night-

light in the baby's room and the light over the stove, he made it through the furniture obstacle course without stubbing his toe or bashing an ankle.

Now if he could only get the little guy to calm down.

“You liked it when I talked to you last time we were in this situation.” Keeping his voice low, Cooper never stopped moving or talking. “Maybe that’ll work again? But what the heck do I say to someone whose only response is an attempt to break my eardrums?”

Three hours later ... three million steps.

Okay, maybe not three million, but it had to be close.

Cooper figured he'd shared his entire life story with the kid, starting with stories of growing up with Ross, Flint and Frannie—the four of them against the world—as they struggled to keep things going despite living with their wayward mother.

He told him about the time he and Ross taught Frannie how to ride a bicycle without training wheels, and when he'd taken on a bully twice his size after the kid refused to stop messing with Flint. Stories of high school, his rodeo days and taking college classes at a variety of places around the country until he finally earned his degree in animal husbandry. He even included every joke he could remember that might be appropriate for little ears.

He'd only paused long enough to grab a few sips of tepid tap water, not wanting to get a mug of hot coffee anywhere near the baby. Man, what he wouldn't give for a cup of joe

Anthony had moments of lesser crying, but he never really

stopped and Cooper was getting worried. He reached for his cell phone and flipped it open. Pressing the “contacts” button, he saw Jeremy and Kirsten’s number listed first.

But he couldn’t make the call. He and Anthony needed to make it through together. On their own.

The baby wasn’t warm so he figured he wasn’t running a fever. He was just cranky and probably missing the familiar surroundings of his former home, but Cooper had never been the one to comfort him. Someone else was always there to take Anthony off his hands. Now, he was the only person his son could rely on, and he was determined to make it work.

“You’re aiming to break the crying record, aren’t ya?” Cooper whispered. “I don’t know where you get your energy.”

Another diaper change, more tries with the bottle, making use of the rocking chair next to the crib.

Nothing worked.

“How about some music? What’s that saying about music soothing the savage beast?” He looked around for a radio, but there were none in the cottage. “Well, I hope you like country, because I don’t know any baby songs.”

He started with the classics from Johnny Cash and worked his way up to Garth Brooks, making up words when the real ones wouldn’t come. He tried the bottle again during his rendition of “Friends in Low Places” and the baby latched on to it. When it was empty, Anthony kept fussing, so Cooper kept singing. Halfway through a favorite tune by Willie Nelson, he suddenly

realized two things.

The sun was starting to rise over the horizon and Anthony was finally asleep.

He put the baby back in his crib—thankful for the blinds that kept the room dark—and crept out into the hallway. Grabbing a much-needed cup of coffee and the handheld baby monitor, he headed to the front porch. Fresh air was called for right about now.

He stared out over the land. The buildings and gentle rolling hills that made up Molly's Pride were still dark against the sky that slowly lightened. The quiet of the morning was only punctured by the soft snores coming through the baby monitor.

Damn, maybe he wasn't doing the right thing after all.

Yeah, they'd made it through the night, but what if he was wrong? What if Anthony cried for so long because he was sick and had only worn himself out?

Stretching his arms wide, Cooper worked out the kinks in his back while offering a silent prayer that this crazy parenting plan of his was the right thing to do.

"I'll take anything you want to send me," he said to the heavens, resting one shoulder against the porch landing. "Just give me a sign."

Ignoring his coffee, he stared into the distance, watching as dark shadows gave way to the coming daylight, a slow and easy progression that never failed to lift his spirits. Then on the horizon a cloud of dust formed out of nowhere, coming straight

at him at breakneck speed. The sound of pounding horse hooves filled the air.

The cloud moved closer, taking the shape of a horse and rider. He straightened the moment the chestnut-colored quarter horse, recognizable by its well-muscled body and powerful, rounded hindquarters, galloped in front of the cottage.

The rider was a woman. She rode without a saddle, crouched low on the horse's back, at ease and in control, with only the reins of the bridle in her grip. Her white dress billowed behind her, molding her curves and displaying miles of long lean legs. Her hair carelessly whipped in the wind, mimicking the horse's tail in length and dark color.

Well, I'll be damned.

He stepped off the porch, the morning dew soaking through his socks, and watched her ride to the top of a nearby hill. The horse slowed to a stop. The rider straightened and turned as if she felt him watching her.

A bright shaft of sunshine had him shielding his eyes. He stepped into the shadow near the porch railing, but when he dropped his hand, she was gone.

Whoa! Who was that beautiful lone rider?

Chapter Two

Cooper listened for the sound of galloping hooves, but heard nothing. The air was still and silent. Then a cool breeze washed over him and he blinked. Hard.

Had he been asleep? Was she a dream?

“Cooper?”

He spun around and found Isabella, JR’s wife, behind him.

“Are you all right?” she asked, moving closer. “You seem a little dazed.”

Rubbing at his eyes, Cooper shook off the vision of the lady in white and smiled. “Hey, Isabella. No, not dazed, just asleep on my feet, I guess.”

She nodded toward the baby monitor on the railing. “Rough first night?”

He shrugged. “We made it through. What are you doing out here so early?”

“Just taking a stroll and enjoying the coolness of the morning.” She tenderly rubbed her rounded abdomen. “Junior tends to be an early riser. Much like his daddy.”

“Well, let’s hope Anthony doesn’t take after either of them.” He glanced at his watch, surprised to see how much time had passed since he put his son to bed. “I just got the little guy to fall asleep an hour ago.”

As soon as Cooper spoke, a cooing noise came through the

monitor.

“Geez, not again.”

“Oh, you must be exhausted. I can sit with Anthony if you want to grab a shower or get some sleep yourself.”

Cooper hesitated. He probably smelled like a mixture of formula, strained peas and baby powder. A shower would be great, but he wondered if it would get back to Jeremy and Kirsten if he took Isabella up on her offer.

“I’m not here to spy on you, Cooper.” Isabella’s soft words cut into his thoughts. “And no one is keeping score on your parenting skills. I’ll admit I headed this way because I figured the baby would have you up early. I just wanted to see how you two were doing.”

He believed the sincerity in her words. “Thanks. It sounds like he’s gone back to sleep, but a shower would be great.”

Once inside, Isabella waved off his apology for the condition of the kitchen and shooed him toward the back of the cottage.

After checking on once-again-sleeping Anthony, Cooper went into the bathroom in his room, stripped down and stood under the hot spray of the shower.

His mind wandered back to the horse and rider. Had he been hallucinating—who was that beautiful angel?

Tired of the bar scene and rarely in one place longer than a month or so over the last year, it’d been a while since Cooper had been in the company of an unattached lady. Not that his body had forgotten how to respond to the sight of incredible legs and

curves to match.

But riding bareback across his cousin's ranch?

He still wasn't sure he hadn't fallen asleep in those few surreal moments, and decided to discover if that vision on horseback had been a figment of his imagination.

Finishing up with a blast of cold water to chase away the final cobwebs, Cooper got out of the shower, dried off and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He walked back into the living room and found Isabella engrossed in his parenting book. He thought about asking her about the mysterious woman, but what if she *had* only been a vision brought on by his exhaustion?

"Interesting stuff, huh?" he asked instead.

She smiled up at him. "Typical reading for a new dad?"

"Especially for one who's only been at it a few weeks." He paused for a moment and then asked, "Do you mind staying just a bit longer? It's been over a week since I've visited Solo. I know JR has had one of the crew members exercising him, but I'd love to take him out for a quick run."

"Sure, go ahead. I'm here as long as you need me."

After making sure she had his cell phone number, Cooper pulled on his boots, grabbed his beat-up straw cowboy hat and headed toward the main barn. He stopped to look at the fresh tracks left in the soft earth by this morning's rider.

So the lady did exist.

Once inside the barn, he took a deep breath, relishing the familiar smells of horses, leather and hay. It was a scent ingrained

in his soul from the first time he'd visited Red Rock as a kid with his brothers and sister. Their mother had shipped them off to stay with her cousin, Ryan Fortune, and his wife, Lily, at the Fortune family homestead so she could travel across Europe with her latest boyfriend. Of all the places at the Double Crown Ranch, Cooper had loved the horse stables the best.

He greeted Solo with a fresh carrot, but his friend seemed more excited about the prospect of taking his owner for a ride than the treat. He quivered with anticipation as Cooper saddled him. When they cleared the fenced corral, the buckskin stallion took off from the gentle trot to a high-speed gallop.

Moments later, they left the buildings behind and it was only a man, his horse and the wild open Texas countryside. Cooper slowed the animal and found himself searching the rolling hills and flatlands for any sign of the beauty in white he'd seen just over an hour ago.

Nothing.

Disappointed, he turned back. He needed time to give Solo a proper rubdown before returning to Anthony. Maybe later he would bring his son out to the barn to meet the horse. He liked the idea of someday teaching the boy how to ride.

He walked the horse back to the barn to allow him to cool down. Once inside, he gave his buddy a full brushing and started to put the supplies back when he heard—

Singing?

Light, feminine and slightly off-key. He followed the lyrical

voice, until finally in the first stall, he found her.

His angel.

Only now her curves were covered by jeans and a simple white T-shirt with the name of the ranch, and well-used, low-heeled boots on her feet. She was a beauty, the natural kind, her long dark hair now pulled back in a high ponytail with loose strands brushing her forehead. An inner glow seemed to radiate from her as she sang softly to the chestnut horse—the same one he'd seen her riding this morning.

He opened his mouth, but his mind blanked on the usual flirting he'd perfected to an art form. Confused by the sudden loss of words, he leaned against the stall door and enjoyed the view.

She moved with purpose and a sureness of someone who'd been around horses all her life. Her touch was gentle, her focus completely on the animal she tended. Moving to the horse's head, she met the animal's broad flat forehead with her own and finished her tune with a gentle kiss.

And damn if a small part of Cooper's heart didn't fall head over boot heels for her. The feeling was so foreign, he couldn't name it and refused to even try.

He gave his head a quick shake to dispel the crazy notion and crossed his arms over his chest. Thankful when his brain finally engaged, he said the first thing that came to his mind. "Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?"

Kelsey Hunt froze at the masculine voice. From where she

stood she couldn't see a face, only a pair of well-worn jeans and cowboy boots that looked as broken in as her own.

Had JR hired another stable hand? In the last year, her boss had turned Molly's Pride into a bustling ranch with new help starting every week. Having come home to Red Rock and this job eight months ago, she was already considered an old hand.

Might as well set this Romeo straight.

"Sorry, cowboy, but the stall is freshly cleaned of manure. I won't allow you to drop any more in here with pick-up lines like that."

She offered a wink to her horse, Harley, and she could've sworn the mare winked right back. Having her heart broken not once, not twice, but three times in the last decade was enough to convince her that the no-strings-attached approach was the best. Her life was about the four-legged creatures she understood with a spooky clarity.

Men? Forget it.

"That bad, huh?"

His raspy chuckle caused a ripple through her insides so intense it actually made her knees weaken for a moment. She chalked up the reaction to her inability to get enough sleep the night before, a rarity for her as she worked hard and slept harder. For some reason, she'd spent hours tossing and turning, leading her to impulsively take a ride at dawn. In her nightgown, no less.

She walked to the end of her horse, smoothing her hand down the glossy coat as she went. Might as well look this guy in the

eye and let him know they were coworkers and nothing more. “Believe it or not, I’ve heard ... w-worse.”

She cleared her throat, blaming the catch in her voice on the dryness of fresh hay she’d just put out for Harley. That had to be it. It couldn’t be because of the intensity in the cowboy’s chocolate-brown eyes as he stared at her.

He wasn’t overly tall, just shy of six feet and he filled out his T-shirt nicely with wide shoulders and muscular arms that came from hard work. The straw Stetson had seen better days, but he wore it as naturally as if he’d been born in it. His faded jeans fit him like a second skin.

His gaze slowly traveled the length of her, too, but she didn’t feel annoyed as she often did by a man’s stare. Maybe because there wasn’t any unseemly suggestion in his eyes, just warm appreciation with a hint of—

Wariness? Now, that was odd for a flirty cowboy.

She swallowed hard before she spoke. “It’s best if I make it clear right now. I don’t play where I sleep.”

That brought his attention back to her face. “Excuse me?”

“What I mean is, I don’t get involved with the people I work with. In my experience, mixing business with pleasure can be toxic, so it’s best to nip things in the bud right up front.”

“I’ll keep that in mind considering I don’t work here.” He pushed himself away from the stall door. “Cooper Fortune.”

Another Fortune? The town of Red Rock was crawling with them. He wasn’t one of JR’s brothers—those she knew by sight—

so he must be a cousin. Is that why the name sounded so familiar?

“Wait, you belong to Solo.”

He grinned, his smile rising into one dimple. “That’s an interesting way of putting it. I prefer to think of him and me as buds, belonging to each other.”

She blushed. “I’m sorry. I just naturally pair up the human with their animal instead of the other way around. Professional habit.”

“And what profession is that?”

“Horse trainer. I’m in charge of the equine program here at Molly’s Pride. I’m Kelsey Hunt.”

He took a step forward but stopped short of entering the stall. One hand stretched outward. “It’s good to meet you, Kelsey.”

Because it would’ve been rude not to, she placed her hand in his. Calloused fingers spoke of hard work as much as his tanned, weathered skin spoke of a life lived outdoors. She tried to remember if JR had told her anything about the owner of the beautiful stallion they’d been housing for the last couple of weeks, but nothing came to mind.

“Are you in town for a visit, Mr. Fortune?”

He released her when she pulled away. “The name is Cooper and I’m here for more than a visit. I’m moving back to Red Rock. Permanently, I guess.”

She tucked Harley’s grooming brush and mane comb on a nearby shelf and grabbed her ball cap with the ranch’s logo. “You guess?”

“JR and his gang of brothers are my cousins. My brother, Ross, and sister, Frannie, live here, too.” He answered while backing up, allowing her to leave the stall and closed the door behind her. “And my son is here as well.”

He was married.

And here he was handing out pick-up lines. Geez, she felt like a loser. One would think with her history she would be able to spot a married man by now.

His slow drawl about “falling from heaven” had been a line if ever she heard one. She prayed he wasn’t another cowboy who figured whatever happened in the barn was okay as long as the little woman in the main house didn’t find out. She loved her job, but fighting off one of her boss’s rich relatives wasn’t part of her job description.

Tugging on the cap, she pulled her long ponytail through the back keyhole. It was time to start her workday. This cowboy didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave, even though he was checking his watch for a second time.

“Well, I should get to my office.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked around the oversize facility. “This is some place you have here. I know JR refurbished the original barn, but this one’s brand-new, right?”

Kelsey could tell he was impressed and for some reason, that pleased her. She’d started here with two horses and a brand-new building JR gave her total control over. Her program now housed a dozen finely trained horses that sold for top dollar as well as

the horses she'd rescued from neglect.

“Yes, it's just under a year old.” She headed toward her office in the front corner of the barn, keeping distance between them as he walked with her. “So, are you and Mrs. Fortune staying here at Molly's Pride?”

“Well, there's plenty of Mrs. Fortunes running around Red Rock, but none belong to me.” He stopped at her door when she did, the power of his gaze commanded she look at him. “I'm not married.”

For a moment it looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn't. She grabbed the door handle and pushed with a bit too much force. “Oh, I assumed when said your son ...”

Embarrassed, she let her voice trail off as she moved to her desk, oddly relieved to have the two feet of wood between her and this cowboy.

“Anthony and I have—well, we just found each other a couple of weeks ago.” He stood in the open doorway, again not invading her space, and punched at the frame with his fist. Not hard, but there was a hint of frustration behind the controlled action. “His mother and I haven't been involved in over a year and I never knew she was pregnant.”

Meaning his son was only an infant. “But you've worked things out it seems, if you're here.”

He shook his head. “She died in a car accident around New Year's. My cousin has been taking care of my son until they found—until I found out about him and came home.”

Immediately, Kelsey thought of her sister, whose husband had died in a construction accident two years ago. Lost for months, Jessica had finally emerged from her grief-induced haze to realize she was doing just fine raising their four young kids by herself, with a little help from Kelsey and Jessica's parents.

Kelsey sank to her chair and waved at the matching one in front of her desk. The man did look like he needed to sit. "I'm so sorry. That must've been some phone call. I remember reading about that accident . . . or was it the one involving JR's father that led to him being missing for months? He's your uncle, right?"

Cooper dropped into the chair. "Yes, my mother's brother. I guess there were two eventful accidents back in January. At least William's has a better outcome now that he's been found and is back home again."

Home, but not whole. Everyone in town knew William Fortune remembered nothing of his previous life. He was back at the Double Crown Ranch with his fiancée, Lily, having gone missing on what was supposed to be their wedding day.

"Well, finding out you're a father must be a happy thing for you."

The cowboy nodded, but the slump of his shoulders revealed an invisible burden. "It's taking some getting used to. I've never been around kids much and rarely one who can barely sit upright. I feel like I've stepped into a parallel universe with strange words like butt cream, binky and onesie."

He suddenly offered her that lopsided grin again and nudged

his hat farther on his brow. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about babies, would ya?”

There was such hope in his voice that she found herself suppressing a snort of laughter. “Ah, horse babies, cow babies, even ducklings and piglets are right up my alley. Human babies, no way. That’s more my sister’s speed.”

“So you’re not married? No kids?”

The closest she’d come to marriage was years ago when she found an engagement ring hidden in her boyfriend’s dresser drawer. Foolishly she’d thought it was meant for her. It wasn’t. Every relationship she’d had since had taught her that falling in love meant saying goodbye. No, thanks. She hadn’t even had a date since moving back home.

“Nope, I must’ve been absent the day they were handing out the maternal gene. I have no interest in marriage or kids.” An idea suddenly came to her. She grabbed the photograph on her desk and flipped it around. “Now, my sister, Jessica, has the mothering gene down pat. I’ll have to introduce you two.”

His eyes went from her to the frame image of her sister surrounded by her four kids, all under the age of eight. It lingered there and Kelsey had to fight back the flame of jealousy that licked at her insides.

You aren’t interested, remember?

A ready-made family wasn’t what Kelsey was looking for. This cowboy certainly wasn’t what she was looking for.

Because she wasn’t looking.

“Are you trying to fix me up with your sister?” he finally asked, looking back at her with those deep brown eyes of his.

Kelsey swallowed hard against the sudden lump lodged in her throat and pushed the words out of her mouth. “You’d be perfect for each other.”

Chapter Three

Cooper wasn't interested in Kelsey's sister.

Still, he wasn't sure if that's where the pretty horse trainer was going with her insistence yesterday that he and Jessica should meet. Heck, he'd been in a brain fog thanks to a lack of sleep and finding out the beautiful woman he'd seen on horseback was real and working right here at Molly's Pride.

A woman who'd quickly put him in his place, he thought with a smile as he watched Anthony snoozing on a quilt in the middle of the living room floor.

After returning from the barn yesterday and thanking Isabella again for watching his son, he'd decided getting some sleep was more important than cleaning the house. It hadn't been as easy as he thought. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Kelsey's long dark hair or her pretty smile.

She'd been so easy to talk to and hadn't seemed upset about his clumsy attempt at a line. He'd checked out her ring finger, happy to find it empty. He was even happier about her "no dating coworkers" rule. At least that cut down on the competition.

Because he was definitely interested in Kelsey.

So he'd smiled at the "hooking up with her sister" remark and headed back to the cottage. The rest of the day had been relatively uneventful, not counting the handful of phone calls from his siblings and cousins that had interrupted his nap.

Obviously, they were all checking up on him. Later, he and Anthony had joined JR and Isabella for dinner. It wasn't hard to get JR to talk about his ranching operations, and Cooper soon learned his cousin thought the world of Kelsey Hunt and her horse-training skills.

He also learned Kelsey lived in an apartment on the second floor of the stables.

Which was why he'd started today with a morning visit to Solo, although he told himself he was only taking Anthony to meet his best friend. The baby had been fascinated with the horse and all the sights and smells of the stables. Cooper held Anthony in his arms, pride filling his chest as the little boy clapped and giggled.

No sign of Kelsey though, so they'd returned home for another bottle and the baby's midmorning nap. Cooper sat nearby, reading the chapter on helping your baby to learn to sit when the cell phone attached to his hip vibrated. He rose from the chair and went into the kitchen.

"Hello?"

"Cooper? It's Lily Fortune."

Lily was his Uncle William's fiancée, but she was also a Fortune having been married to William's cousin, Ryan, until his death years ago of brain cancer. William had lost his beloved wife a few years later, but now William and Lily had fallen in love and had planned to marry.

But William had disappeared on their wedding day.

“Hi, Lily.” He wondered how she got his phone number. “Is everything okay? Is it Uncle William?”

“Oh, no, sweetie, William is ... fine. His memory and his emotional state, or lack thereof on both accounts, are the same.”

Lily’s unsteady voice filled his ear. She then paused to take in a deep breath before she continued. “He’s calmer now and seems more at home here on the ranch with each passing day.” She sounded calmer now herself. “I’m sorry if I worried you by calling.”

Cooper released the breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. “Ah, no, that’s fine. What’s up?”

“I heard about you moving out on your own with the baby, and I wondered if there was anything you needed? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Lily Fortune was an amazing woman. She ran the Double Crown Ranch and chaired numerous charities supported by the Fortune Foundation, all while doing her best to help the man she loved regain his memories—of his family, and the life they’d planned to live together.

He found himself wishing he’d been lucky enough to have this lady for a mother instead of the self-centered woman who probably had no idea that she had another grandchild living here in Red Rock.

“Thanks, but we’re doing fine.” Cooper peeked around the doorway to check on his son. “It’s a pretty steep learning curve, but I think I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Of course you are. I don’t have any doubt you’ll be a terrific father.”

Her words had him standing a bit taller. “Thank you, Lily. You know, I was planning to come out and visit the ranch soon, but Jeremy recommended we not overload William with too many visitors at once.”

“Oh, you’re welcome anytime. I can’t say for sure what kind of mood your uncle will be in. Sometimes he’s fine and other times he’s a bit cranky, but I think that’s frustration more than anything else.”

They spoke for a few more minutes, but then Anthony started to fuss. Cooper ended the call, having learned his son tended to wake up fast and loud.

“Easy there, partner.” He looked at the baby lying flat on his back, arms and legs flailing. “No need to get all excited.”

Anthony didn’t agree because he let loose a howling cry just as a knock sounded from the door.

Cooper picked him up and the smell and weight of Anthony’s diaper told him exactly why the kid was upset. “Whew, you stink!”

The knock came again, and he went to answer, mentally cringing as he hefted the baby into his arms, the diaper flattening against his forearm. He opened the door to find Kelsey standing on his front porch, wearing the same outfit he’d seen her in yesterday.

He appreciated the curves beneath her clingy T-shirt and snug-

fitting jeans. A ball cap shaded her eyes and her hair was once again pulled up in a ponytail. He was suddenly struck with an urge to see her hair down around her shoulders. Naked shoulders would be even better, as she leaned over him—

A softly cleared throat caught his attention, and he noticed a pretty lady standing next to Kelsey. They looked so much alike, he knew instantly they were related. The three little kids with them told him she must be Kelsey's sister.

Boy, she really was serious about her matchmaking.

He didn't know if he should be amused or bothered that Kelsey had brought her widowed sister, kids in tow, over to meet him.

Had he been the only one to pick up on the instant connection they'd shared yesterday? A connection that had him opening up to a perfect stranger about how much his life had changed in the last month?

"Hey there. Hope we're not catching you at a bad time," Kelsey said, a smile gracing her kissable lips.

Yeah, perfect.

"Ah, no." Cooper patted Anthony's bottom lightly, sending tiny bursts of a foul odor into the air as if to punctuate where his priorities needed to lie. His nose wrinkled. "The little guy just woke from a nap and I was heading off to do diaper duty."

"Don't let us stop you," the other woman said with a smile. "He'll probably be happier once he's clean and dry."

"Well, come on in—" Cooper stepped back "—and make yourselves at home. I'll be right back."

He hustled to the baby's room and laid a still-crying Anthony on the changing table. Replacing the messy diaper took longer than he planned. Boy, who knew a body as tiny as this could put out so much ... stuff.

Finally done, he put a new one-piece sleeper on Anthony, noting the dwindling supply of baby wipes seemed to be in direct correlation to the dirty laundry filling the nearby hamper. Looked like a trip to the grocery store was next on his list.

Despite a fresh diaper, Anthony was testing the capacity of his lungs as Cooper walked back into the living room.

"I'm sorry," he said, raising his voice to be heard over Anthony's crying as he patted his son's back. "He must've realized he'd nodded off earlier without finishing his bottle."

"Here, let me take him." Kelsey's sister plucked Anthony out of his arms and turned to her children. "Kids, park yourselves on the sofa and find something in your backpacks to keep you busy while your Aunt Kelsey and I get to know this adorable little thing."

Dumbfounded, Cooper stood there as Anthony stopped his crying and gazed up at the woman as the children scrambled to do their mother's bidding.

"Wow." He finally found his voice, but the single syllable was the best he could come up with. "That's ... wow."

"Cooper Fortune, your son's kidnapper is my sister, Jessica Hunt-Myers." Kelsey made the quick introduction. "Jessica, this is Cooper Fortune."

“Hi, there,” Jessica said. “I think I can keep—ah, what’s his name?”

“Anthony.”

“I think I can keep Anthony busy for a few minutes if you want to make him that bottle.” Jessica sat in the chair Cooper had vacated and easily bounced the baby on her lap while answering three different questions from three different kids.

Cooper moved into the kitchen and quickly made a new bottle. He returned to the living room, expecting Jessica to give up her claim to his son, but she just motioned for the bottle, popping it into Anthony’s mouth.

He moved to the matching chair and sat, his gaze drawn to Kelsey. Perched on the end of the couch, with the youngest of her sister’s kids on her lap, she pointed to something in the book the little boy held. His tiny eyebrows puckered in concentration for a minute before he clucked like a chicken.

Cooper grinned. “Hey, that’s pretty good. Can you do a cow?”

The little boy looked at him. “We’re not at that page yet.”

“Adam.” His mother admonished him with one word, before she turned to Cooper. “I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce my children. The little one is Adam and he’s a very precocious three, and the twins, Braden and Bethany, are four. My oldest, Ella, is seven, so she’s at school.”

“What’s per-cos-ick?” Adam asked his mother.

“Precocious, and it means you’re very smart,” she answered with a smile as she set aside the empty bottle to lift Anthony

to her shoulder. "All of my children are very smart," she added when the twins started to protest. "They take after their father."

"Kelsey told me about your husband. I'm sorry."

Cooper watched as sadness flickered across the woman's face before she offered him a smile.

"Thank you. She told me about Anthony's mother. I'm sorry, too. You must have your hands full learning to be a single parent." She patted the baby's back, and soon Anthony let out a loud burp and giggled at his accomplishment. "I know what that's like. If you need any help, just give me a holler."

He turned to look at Kelsey, who seemed very interested in the picture book her nephew was holding. So, she really was serious about this matchmaking.

Hmm, right idea, wrong sister.

Cooper glanced back at Jessica. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Are you sure?" Kelsey stared at her sister over the roof of her car. "You really want to do *this*?"

"Are you kidding?" Jessica shot back as she shut her door and activated the automatic locks. "You have no idea how much I am going to enjoy myself."

They walked across the parking lot toward the large building. Seconds later, automatic doors swished open and then closed behind them, locking out the Texas heat and bathing them in a cool breeze.

"With Mom and Dad watching the kids this afternoon, I've got three hours all to myself."

Kelsey followed Jessica as she ventured farther into the brightly lit entrance. “So, go see a movie, get a massage, read a book ... anything but this.”

“Spoken like a single woman who can be in and out of here in less than fifteen minutes and use the express checkout line.”

Jessica grabbed a large silver cart and aimed it toward the rainbow of colors that made up the produce section of the super-size grocery store. “Now, I can thump melons to my heart’s content, wrangle between cuts of meats at the butcher shop and actually make good use of my overstuffed coupon caddy.”

Kelsey rolled her eyes as Jessica’s fingers lightly danced over the vibrant array of apples, from light green to deep red, piled in front of her.

“This is nirvana,” her sister said.

They moved to the first aisle and Kelsey grabbed a bottle of wine from the end display and put it in the cart. A six-pack cellophane package of chocolate bars followed next.

She caught her sister’s disapproving glance. “Hey, you have your idea of heaven and I have mine.”

“Speaking of heaven,” Jessica paused as she looked over a selection of breakfast cereals in the next aisle, “that cowboy of yours is pretty dreamland-worthy.”

“He’s not my cowboy,” Kelsey protested. “In fact, I thought the two of you got along famously yesterday.”

“Yes, so famously that the guy could barely take his eyes off you the whole time.”

“Oh, please.”

“Besides, I told you before, I’m not in the market for a replacement for Peter.”

Her sister’s words were soft, but Kelsey heard the catch in her voice. “I’ve never suggested you replace him. That would be impossible. I just thought you’d finally turned the corner ...”

“I have.” Jessica turned to Kelsey and gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “My life is filled with my children and my art. There’s no room right now for a man.”

“But you could fall in love again—”

“I h-had my shot at hap-happily ever after,” Jessica interrupted, her own words stumbling from her lips. “And it was wonderful for the short time it lasted.”

Her sister’s sudden interest in spaghetti sauce and the rapid blinking told Kelsey to change the subject.

Jessica took care of that for her as she grabbed the same brand of sauce she’d used for years and put it in the cart. “Now you, on the other hand—”

“Aren’t interested.”

Jessica looked her in the eye. “Liar.”

“Okay, so Cooper Fortune is a total hottie,” Kelsey relented, knowing it was useless to argue. She hated that her sister had always been able to tell when she was being less than honest. “But he and that adorable baby have got home and family written all over them and that’s not for me.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard you sing that tune for a long time. Ever since

that jerk you dated all through college dumped you just before graduation for that former Miss Texas who could give him the proper home and proper children.” Jessica punctuated her last words with the two quick jerks of her fingers showing she was quoting Kelsey’s ex’s words.

“Well, he was right. Thomas is doing very well in his law practice and he’s eyeing a political future. He and his family made the cover of *Texas Now!* a few months ago.”

“Whoopee.”

“Besides, he never liked that I smelled like a barn at the end of the day.” Something he failed to mention even once during their four-year relationship after they met their freshman year at West Texas A&M University.

“An issue I don’t think Cooper would have a problem with.”

Kelsey grabbed a package of cookies from the shelf and placed them in the cart. “Been there, done that. My last two relationships were both with cowboys and neither one ended pretty.”

“Not surprising since you didn’t bring either of them home to Red Rock to meet the family.”

She’d tried, but neither cowboy had had any interest in her life back here while she was dating them, which turned out to be a good thing as both men ended up walking out on her. “Well, my only focus right now is building one of the best equine programs Red Rock has ever seen.”

“You’re kicking butt and your boss knows it, but that doesn’t

mean all men—or all cowboys, for that matter—need to be off-limits. Cooper Fortune is perfect—” Jessica turned the corner and started past the next aisle, then stopped. “Hmm, it looks like perfect cowboy is having a problem at the moment.”

Kelsey didn't know what her sister was talking about until she noticed Cooper, standing in the middle of the baby aisle, a confused look on his handsome face as he held up two different jumbo-size packages of diapers. The shopping cart in front of him was full while his son dozed in the attached car seat.

A burst of fiery attraction exploded in her gut, but she quickly put it out in hopes that Jess might just find herself drawn to the man. That thought gave Kelsey another kick in her stomach—and it wasn't a pleasant one.

The last time the two of them took a liking to the same guy was back in junior high school when Kelsey found herself crushing on a boy who ended up taking Jessica to the eighth-grade dance. The same boy her sister dated all through high school and married at the tender age of nineteen. Peter and Jessica had always only had eyes for each other, so it'd been easy for Kelsey to let go of her silly case of puppy love.

Not that she liked Cooper Fortune.

Not like that. Yeah, he was the quintessential hunky Texas cowboy, but again, she wasn't interested.

Remember that, girlfriend. Not interested.

“Oh, the poor guy.” Jessica turned her cart. “Come on, let's help him.”

Kelsey silently repeated her words as she followed her sister's lead, noticing the fine way Cooper's shoulders filled out his faded, snap-front shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms.

"You're looking a bit lost, cowboy," Jessica said, stopping her cart next to his. "Need any help? This is probably the most confusing aisle in the entire store."

Her sister's words pulled Kelsey from her thoughts in time to see the bewilderment on Cooper's face fade into an easygoing smile.

"You're not kidding." He dropped his hands, the diapers bouncing off his jean-clad legs. "It took me ten minutes to figure out which baby wipes were the right ones and I haven't even hit the food area yet."

His dark eyes looked past her sister and latched on to her. His laid-back grin deepened as he added a hint of sexiness to it. "Hey, Kelsey."

The image of her kissing that mouth while slowly pulling open his shirt—*snap, snap, snap*—filled Kelsey's head. It took a hard blink to erase it. Her mouth was suddenly drier than a Texas summer day and she had to lick her lips before she spoke. "Hey, yourself."

He held her gaze for a moment before dropping his eyes to her lips. She could've sworn he actually knew what she'd been thinking, as impossible as that might be.

"So ..." Jessica cleared her throat. "Are you a bit puzzled by

the diaper selection?”

Cooper looked at her again, his easy smile back in place. “It’s that obvious, huh? I didn’t even think to write down the brand my cousin and his fiancée had used for the little guy and we ran out this morning.”

Jessica pointed to the package in his right hand. “Those always worked best for my crowd, but you need the right size.”

“Size?”

“It’s based on the baby’s weight.”

“Oh.” Cooper looked at the packages, put both back on the shelf and grabbed three in the correct size. “Anthony is going through these things like crazy. Better safe than sorry. Now, it’s on to that amazing assortment of baby mush—ah, food.”

“Jess, why don’t you lend your expertise on that, too?” Kelsey grabbed her sister’s cart and pushed it past Cooper’s to allow another shopper to get by. “I can keep working on your list for you.”

Jessica shot Kelsey a frown over Cooper’s bent form as he shoved the diapers onto the bottom shelf of his cart. “Sure, I can do that.”

Kelsey only grinned in return and forced herself not to look at Cooper’s perfect backside, encased in faded denim. “Great, where’s your list?”

“Could I bother you to keep an eye on Anthony instead for a few minutes?” Cooper rose and turned to her, moving closer while gesturing toward the baby. “He’s been trying to nap since

we arrived. Every time I move the cart it wakes him.”

“Uh, yeah ...” She had to tip her head back to look at him, and she could’ve sworn the tips of his boots scraped hers, he was that close. “Sure, it’s no bother.”

Damn, that sexier-than-sin smile was back and directed right at her. “Thanks, I’ll owe you.”

Cooper and Jessica moved toward the other end of the aisle where the stacks of baby food jars stood in precise rows on the shelves. Kelsey looked down at Anthony, watching his tiny eyelids flutter as he slept. With his dark brown hair, and the brown eyes she’d seen briefly yesterday at the cottage, he looked a lot like his daddy.

He’d fallen asleep in Jessica’s arms yesterday, the two of them the exact likeness of Madonna and child. If there was anyone who’d been destined to be a mother, it was her sister. From childhood, she’d been a loving mama to her baby dolls while Kelsey’s side of the room had been filled with horse figurines.

“Looks like we both got what we wanted,” Kelsey whispered, unable to stop herself from stroking the baby’s soft cheek. “Except Jessica never planned on being a single parent. That’s why your daddy and she would be such a good match.”

Anthony chose that moment to open his eyes, and as if he wasn’t happy with her idea, started to fuss.

Kelsey jerked her hand away and looked for Cooper. He and Jessica were at the other end of the aisle. The baby’s fidgeting intensified, his eyes now clenched tightly closed, so she grabbed

the cart and started to push it back and forth, but that only increased his crying.

Geez, it was moments like this when she usually gave her niece or nephew back to their mother. Another quick glance told her Jessica and Cooper weren't heading back to this end of the aisle soon, so she quickly unbuckled the baby and hefted him into her arms.

"Okay, no need to get upset," she cooed while rubbing the baby's back. "I've got you."

Anthony snuggled into her shoulder and she held tighter, tucking her face close to his and continuing with her soft words. Her body moved in a natural swaying motion, and soon she was rewarded when the baby heaved a deep sigh and fell back asleep, his breath coming in gentle puffs against her neck.

"Well, you certainly seem to have the magic touch."

Kelsey turned to find Cooper standing behind her. Jessica and her shopping cart had disappeared. How'd that happen? And how was it that she and Cooper were the only people in this vast aisle of the grocery store?

"Anthony looks right at home in your arms," he added, taking a step closer, trapping her between the cart and the shelves behind her. "Not that I blame him. Envy, maybe. You know, I think you might be wrong about lacking the maternal instinct."

"Oh, no. Jessica is—"

"An amazing lady and from what I've seen, a terrific mom." Cooper cut off her words while reaching out to gently tug on a

loose strand of hair that had fallen from her ponytail. “But she’s not the sister who’s caught my attention. You are.”

Chapter Four

As far as dirty diapers went, this one had to be the world record holder. Cooper choked back his gag reflex when the pungent odor filled his nose and mouth.

Anthony looked up at him and smiled.

Cooper's heart gave a little kick as he peeled off the baby's messy clothes and set them to one side of the quilt. So much for having done two loads of laundry this morning.

"Damn, this is nasty!" He ripped at the diaper tabs and pulled the front flap back, and the nausea factor climbed a hundredfold as his eyes burned. "Whew! Major nasty!"

Anthony giggled.

"Glad you think this is so funny." Cooper grimaced, grabbing a handful of baby wipes. He tried to clean up his son, but all he seemed to do was succeed in spreading the mess even farther. He removed the diaper and dropped it on an old issue of "Texas Now!" he'd been reading. "Boy, you need to be hosed down to get rid of this stench."

"I second that."

On his hands and knees, Cooper turned and looked over his shoulder. Kelsey stood peering at him through the screen door.

"It looks like I got here just in time." She hoisted the blue plastic object in her hands a bit higher. "My sister said she offered you this baby tub while in the store. Can I come in?"

“If you think your nose can stand it.” Cooper found himself grinning at her. “And your timing is perfect.”

“Why don’t we try rinsing him off before you get him in a bath?” Kelsey suggested as she walked into the dining area and placed the tub on the table. She unzipped her hoodie and peeled it off her shoulders revealing yet another ranch T-shirt, this time pale pink in color. “Is the bathroom sink big enough?”

Big enough for what?

Cooper tore his gaze from her body and shook his head, realizing she was talking about the baby. “No, and the kitchen sink is too big. He squirms so much that I can’t keep a good grip on him, which is why your sister made her generous offer.”

“Okay, give me a minute to get everything we need. Then you can get that stinky baby washed up.”

“Make it a fast minute, okay?” Cooper grabbed the soiled onesie and put it over Anthony’s privates. He’d already been a victim of the baby’s sudden need to urinate, diaper or not, resulting in a steady stream hitting him square in the chest. “I’m about to lose my lunch over here.”

Kelsey’s laugh followed her down the hall to the baby’s room. The low, sexy sound rocked Cooper back on his heels. Two days ago, he’d been tempted beyond reason to kiss her in the baby aisle of the grocery store.

Despite the craziness of their current situation, he found himself ready to do it again. And this time he wouldn’t back away.

Kelsey had been so focused on Anthony that day, her head bent, humming a low tune as she rocked him, that she hadn't heard him and Jessica approach. Her sister had given him a sly wink as she disappeared around the corner with her own shopping cart. Moments later, he had Kelsey cornered between the cart and the shelving. The silky feeling of her hair sliding through his fingers, the softness of her cheek, the way her lips parted in surprise when he made it clear she was the one he wanted.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.