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The Bull Rider's Baby

Brenda Minton



Cooper Creek

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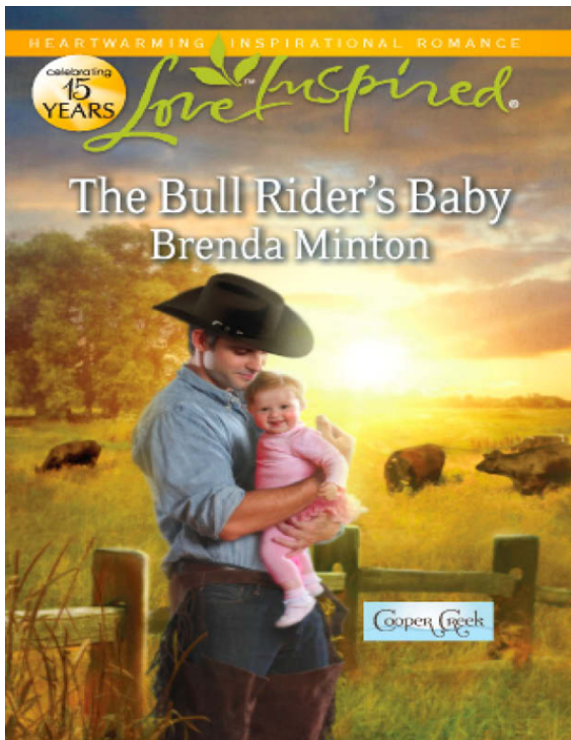
The Bull Rider's Baby

Аннотация

COOPER CREEK'S NEWEST DAD One minute, Keeton West is a confirmed bachelor and bull rider who lives out of a suitcase. The next, he's the single dad of a baby he didn't know existed. Now back in his hometown, everyone remembers the tragedy that changed his—and Sophie Cooper's—lives forever. He desperately needs Sophie's help with little Lucy. But spending time with Keeton seems to remind Sophie of all she lost. She won't get close to another bull rider. Yet one sweet baby girl has her own way of bringing two hearts together. Cooper Creek: Home is where the heart is for this Oklahoma family.

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Cooper Creek's newest dad

One minute, Keeton West is a confirmed bachelor and bull rider who lives out of a suitcase. The next, he's the single dad of a baby he didn't know existed. Now back in his hometown, everyone remembers the tragedy that changed his—and Sophie Cooper's—lives forever. He desperately needs Sophie's help with

little Lucy. But spending time with Keeton seems to remind Sophie of all she lost. She won't get close to another bull rider. Yet one sweet baby girl has her own way of bringing two hearts together.

"What am I going to do with her, Sophie?" Keeton asked.

"I'd say the same thing parents have done with babies for hundreds of years. Take her home and raise her."

"I'm a bull rider. I'm on the road almost fifty percent of the time. I'm living in a house that isn't even livable."

Bull rider. That reminder had Sophie stepping back in her car, away from him, away from the tug on her heart and back into her shell. "Yes, well, I'd say you'd better get it livable."

"You could help me."

"I did. I changed the nastiest diaper in the history of diapers." She glanced at her watch. "I'm late."

"We have to talk about the land."

"Later."

"Dinner?" He leaned in, holding tight to Lucy.

"Nope. I don't date bull riders." She started her car and reached to close the door. He stood there, not moving.

"I'm not asking you out."

Ouch. That hurt a little, for some crazy reason. "Good, I'm not accepting."

"Fine, I'll see you later," he said with a grin.

BRENDA MINTON

started creating stories to entertain herself during hour-long

rides on the school bus. In high school, she wrote romance novels to entertain her friends. The dream grew and so did her aspirations to become an author. She started with notebooks, handwritten manuscripts and characters that refused to go away until their stories were told. Eventually she put away the pen and paper and got down to business with the computer. The journey took a few years, with some encouragement and rejection along the way—as well as a lot of stubbornness on her part. In 2006, her dream to write for Love Inspired Books came true. Brenda lives in the rural Ozarks with her husband, three kids and an abundance of cats and dogs. She enjoys a chaotic life that she wouldn't trade for anything—except, on occasion, a beach house in Texas. You can stop by and visit at her website, www.brendaminton.net.

The Bull Rider's Baby

Brenda Minton



www.millsandboon.co.uk

A man's heart plans his way,
But the Lord directs his steps.

—Proverbs 16:9

I would like to dedicate this book to my agent,
now retired, Janet Benrey. Thank you
for long years of hard work, hand-holding, encouragement
and the careful prodding
that kept me going and kept me focused.

You're more than an agent, you're a friend.

And Melissa, my amazing editor and encourager. Thank you
for everything you do!

To my awesome BFFs, you are always there for me. I love you
and wish we could have coffee every morning—in person, not

on the phone.

And Mary...for being a mom and so much more. Thank you for making this easier.

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Chapter One

When Keeton West entered Convenience Counts store at seven in the morning, Sophie Cooper was the last person he

expected to see. But there she was, running down the sidewalk, brushing a hand through her shoulder-length auburn hair. Not really auburn, though. Her hair had always been dark brown. The hint of red probably came from a bottle, but he liked it.

He even kind of liked her in a slim-fitting business suit, her high heels clicking on the floor as she walked through the door. She looked like an executive from some Tulsa high-rise office building, not the daughter of a wealthy rancher. She was a sleek and shiny European car in a world of pickup trucks.

He grinned at that comparison and watched as she hurried through the glass door at the front of the store. He thought about approaching her, and then reconsidered. Exhaustion must be getting to him or it wouldn't have crossed his mind.

For the past two nights he'd gotten almost no sleep. And then this morning he'd gotten up early to head into Dawson for a few necessities. The baby in his arms had insisted on the supplies.

The problem was, he didn't know what things a baby required. She cried, that's about all he knew. And he knew in baby talk, crying meant something. Either she was hungry, needed changing or something else was wrong. At about two in the morning he started to think the last choice might be the correct one. After he gave her the last bottle he had, he was at a loss. A few hours later he found himself here, hiding from Sophie Cooper before he could ask the store's proprietor for baby advice.

"Hey, Sophie, what has you out so early in the morning?" Trish Cramer leaned over the counter at the front of the store. She and

her husband, Jimmy, had owned Convenience Counts for as long as Keeton could remember. And they'd always liked to keep tabs on what was happening in Dawson, Oklahoma.

There wasn't a local paper, but the folks in Dawson had Jimmy and Trish.

"I'm just here to grab some breakfast." Sophie grinned at them. She had a smile that could knock a guy to the ground.

She'd always been beautiful. The woman was even better than the girl she'd been years ago. If things had been different, she would have married his brother, been his sister-in-law. If everything hadn't changed on a June night sixteen years ago, that is. But it had changed. Nothing could undo that night.

Keeton sighed and moved around the corner of the shelves he'd been standing in front of, out of the line of sight so that he wouldn't be the first thing Sophie saw when she turned his way.

He peeked, though. Like a thirteen-year-old kid spying on cheerleaders when they'd stopped for a diet cola after practice. Yeah, he'd been that kid. And Trish had given him the eye then, the way she was now.

"You're working on a Saturday?" Trish looked over the tops of her glasses.

"Do you need gas pumped?" Jimmy came around the corner of the counter, wiping his hands on a rag.

"No, I filled up last night. I just need to grab breakfast and go." She stopped in front of the warming tray and eyed food that had been sitting under a heat lamp probably since the place opened

an hour ago.

Breakfast pizza and a few egg sandwiches. He'd grab something for himself, once he figured out what a three-month-old baby ate for breakfast. He looked down at the mysterious creature cuddled up against him. For once the baby wasn't crying.

He had to stop thinking of her as "the baby." She was his baby. Lucy. She cuddled into him, trusting, even after just a couple of days of knowing him. His baby. He shook his head, the way he'd been doing since his ex-wife had dropped Lucy with him. A baby hadn't been on his list of things to get.

But he had her, and he couldn't imagine not having her. Although he could imagine getting a little more rest. He hoped sleep didn't turn out to be a thing of the past.

"Honey, you're always in a hurry." Trish had moved closer to Sophie. "When are you going to settle down?"

"No time for settling down, Trish. Work keeps me busy."

Trish laughed at that. "Well, that isn't going to keep you warm when the winters are long. You need a husband."

Keeton nearly groaned because when Trish said "husband" she shot him a look over Sophie's right shoulder. He shushed the baby and repositioned her. Babies were heavy. He hadn't realized how heavy a twelve-pound bit of fluff and spit-up could be until he'd spent a full day hauling one around.

"I think I'll be fine. I've got a good furnace." Sophie answered Trish on the husband issue. "I'll just grab something off the shelf."

“All of this hurrying isn’t good for your digestion,” Trish called out, the all-knowing voice of reason and common sense.

“Then I’ll take a pack of those antacids you have behind the counter to go with whatever I buy.”

Keeton pulled his hat down low and grinned at the comeback. One thing about Sophie Cooper, she wasn’t a wallflower. She’d slapped him once, years ago. He shook his head and reached for a jar of baby food because maybe Lucy needed more than bottles. When he got to the register, he’d ask Trish.

Click click of heels. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Sophie hurried in his direction. With a single step he moved back to the end of the aisle. She stopped in front of the few breakfast items on the shelves, frowning as she surveyed the options.

The baby in his arms whimpered. He bounced her a little, hoping to quiet her down. It had worked last night. He’d spent about an hour swaying back and forth in his living room, wishing he had real furniture and maybe the smarts to tackle his situation a little differently.

Smart would have been not marrying Becka Janson because he felt sorry for her. She’d played him good. She’d found out his winnings, his earnings and how much he’d invested in Jeremy Hightree’s custom motorcycle business and she’d latched on quick. At least he’d been smart enough for a prenup.

The baby in his arms wiggled, squirmed and let out a real cry. Sophie Cooper turned, her hazel eyes widened as she zeroed in on him and the baby. A smile trembled on her lips and her gaze

shifted from the baby to him.

He tipped his hat and grinned, knowing charm and good looks weren't going to mean a thing to the woman standing in front of him. Her attention wasn't on him anyway. She looked at the baby, the coolness in her eyes softening, warming.

Man, she hadn't changed much at all. She could still stop a guy in his tracks and make him forget what he wanted to say.

"Keeton West." Her voice shook a little. "And a baby."

He held the baby with one arm and cupped the two jars of food in his free hand. He knew his shirt had spit-up smeared on the shoulder and he hadn't shaved in three days. He couldn't think of a thing to say that wouldn't sound ridiculous.

"Me and a baby." Stupid. Pre-Lucy he would have winked and said something like "It's been a long time." Or, "Sophie, you're as beautiful as ever."

Instead he jabbered like the infant in his arms and echoed her like a fifteen-year-old with his first crush. Actually, he knew fifteen-year-old boys who would have done better.

If he'd had any sense at all he would have stayed in Broken Arrow. He had a nice little place on the edge of the city. But wanting his family land back—that had been his driving force for as long as he could remember. He needed to remember that was his reason for being here.

One thing stood between him and the biggest portion of that land. Sophie Cooper. She'd bought one hundred acres of land that used to be his family farm.

She smiled at the baby, not at him. “She’s beautiful.”

* * *

Next time Sophie would listen to that little voice that told her to run in and get a breakfast sandwich from the Mad Cow. But no, she’d been in a hurry and thought the local convenience store would be quicker.

Surprise, nothing was ever quick in Dawson. Or easy. People always managed to get in her business. If it wasn’t her family it was one of the locals trying to find out what she’d been up to, or trying to find a way to marry her off.

Today the problem happened to be Keeton West.

She had one hour to get to a meeting in Grove and then she had her other project to work on. And Keeton West had something dripping down the front of his shirt, very close to where it was unbuttoned at the throat. Very close to the silver cross and chain that he wore around his very tan neck.

She cleared her throat and stumbled back to the present. The main thing she didn’t want to discuss with him was land she’d recently bought.

The baby in his arms forced her to act, though. Maybe it had to do with being a Cooper. Or maybe she couldn’t run from biology. Even if she didn’t have children of her own. Was it her imagination or did she hear a very loud clock tickticking in her ear?

The baby spit up again.

“Keeton, she’s sick.” Sophie grabbed a role of paper towels

off the shelf and ripped them open. “Here, sweetie. Oh, that’s awful stuff.”

Keeton West and a baby. She tried to connect dots and couldn’t. She couldn’t imagine him with a child. And yet... She wiped the baby’s chin. The infant had his nose. She had his brother Kade’s nose. The thought ached deep down inside Sophie, in a place that had been broken and empty for a long time. It was the part of her heart that still missed Kade. Or what they might have had.

Pudgy baby arms reached for her and big eyes overflowed with tears that trickled down the little girl’s pink cheeks. Keeton held tight and Sophie put on a smile that said none of this hurt, none of it mattered. She had survived. She’d gotten past the pain of losing Kade. She was whole.

“Thank you.” Keeton’s voice was low and husky, his eyes sought hers. And she couldn’t look at him, not without seeing Kade. The resemblance shook her. The dark hair. The lean, suntanned features. The dark eyes that danced with laughter or smoldered with emotion. Ugh, she was so not able to deal with this.

When she looked at Keeton she remembered the night he pulled the bull rope for Kade. It was just one of the memories they shared. Common ground that she didn’t want to be on today.

“You’re welcome.” She stood there with a handful of smelly paper towels and nowhere to run to. “What are you doing back in town?”

“I’m here to get our land back.”

Oh. Well, she didn’t quite know what to say to that. “I didn’t know you had a baby.”

He grinned, and the ornery leaked back into his brown eyes.

“Yeah, neither did I until a few days ago. Long story but I divorced her mother about a year ago. Or her mother divorced me. And we didn’t see each other again until she showed up on my doorstep with what she called a ‘surprise.’”

“And where’s her mother?”

“On her way to South America with a bull rider she met a few months ago.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could she say? “What’s her name?”

“Lucy Monroe West.” He smiled down at the little girl. “And I don’t have a clue what I’m supposed to do with her.”

“You do what you’re doing. Hold her. Feed her. Love her.”

“And what do I feed her?” He shrugged a little and looked from Sophie to the baby. “I mean, food? Milk?”

“Formula.” Sophie reached for a box. “She’s little, Keeton. No food. Not yet.”

“Right, formula in a bottle.” He juggled the baby and the stuff he’d picked up, putting baby food back on the shelf.

Sophie wanted to take the baby. And she didn’t want to take her. She couldn’t get involved, not with Keeton. That would be a mistake. It would be stepping back into the past. She was thirty-five. She didn’t have time for the past.

She had a present to worry about. Her life today filled with

too many matchmakers, not enough single men, work and her own projects. Life.

“I should go.”

“Right, and maybe we can catch up later.”

He smiled when he said it, because he didn't mean it. Neither of them wanted to get together, to relive, to catch up.

“Well, it was good seeing you again.” She smiled and moved to slide past him.

“Yeah, it was.” He stepped back, the baby in one arm, a teddy bear diaper bag slung over the other and a loaf of bread balancing on top of the package of diapers he had managed to pick up.

The baby watched her, tears in watery blue eyes. For years Sophie had lied to herself. She tried to convince herself that growing up a Cooper, with a dozen siblings and an array of foster children in the home, she could live without babies. She'd had enough.

And it wasn't true. She wanted a baby of her own. She wanted to hold the baby in Keeton West's arms.

She grabbed a cola from the cooler section. Next to her, Keeton jostled the baby in his arms and nearly lost his hold on her.

Instinct took over. Sophie reached, the baby grabbed. Suddenly Sophie had the spit-up-covered baby in her arms and Keeton moved the diapers to his free hand.

“Don't get too comfortable. You have to take her back,” Sophie warned. But the baby held tight to her shirt and

whimpered. Sophie kissed the little forehead.

Keeton grinned. "But she looks perfect in your arms. Look at the red in her hair. You're a match."

"This isn't..."

He winked then. "Yeah, I know it isn't."

She looked down at the tiny creature in her arms. Lucy smelled positively awful. And she was wet clean through. "You could have warned me."

She held the baby out to him and he looked perplexed. And he looked as if he'd just rode in off the range with his faded Levis, washed-out blue, button-up shirt and dusty boots. Surprise, surprise, he didn't have on chaps, or a gun in a holster on his belt. That would have been a little too Old West, even for Keeton.

"Sorry." He didn't look it. "Do me a favor, hold her for a second. Just give me a chance to get this to the counter."

"You know I will."

She spotted toaster pastries with blueberry filling and knew exactly what she'd be having for breakfast. With the baby in one hand she grabbed the box and tried to pretend she wasn't a grown woman buying breakfast food that came in a box and contained more sugar than most cookies.

"On a health-food kick?" Keeton grabbed a container of baby wipes. "Let me pay and I'll take her back."

"Why is it I think you'd hit that door running if I gave you half a chance?" Sophie followed him to the cash register and almost

parked herself between him and the door. "I go first."

She put her breakfast on the counter and with her free hand dug in her purse for cash. Keeton dumped his groceries next to hers. He also took the roll of paper towels, and the used ones still wadded up in her hands. Those he tossed behind the counter into a waste basket.

"I'm buying." He grinned. "I always told you I'd take you to dinner someday. Looks like I'm buying your breakfast today."

"You really don't have to."

"I owe you." He nodded at the front of her jacket, now soaked and with a trail of spit-up down the front.

The baby turned into her shoulder and started crying. She rubbed her face back and forth on Sophie's collar. Baby slime. And goo. And she didn't have time to go home and change.

"Keeton West, you never answered." Trish grinned at the infant. "Where'd you get that pretty baby?"

He grinned, and Sophie applauded his silence. If he said anything it would be all over town by the end of the day. Or by lunch.

Trish came around the counter, maternal and an obvious choice to hold the squalling infant clinging to Sophie's collar.

"It's a long story." Keeton dug his wallet out of his pocket and tossed a couple of bills on the counter.

"Well, we've got time for long stories, don't we, Jimmy?" Trish touched the baby's back. "My goodness, she stinks."

"Yeah, I ran out of diapers."

Warmth spread down Sophie's front before Trish could take the baby. Now it wasn't just the back of the baby's sleeper that was soaked.

"Uh-oh." Keeton grabbed the bags Jimmy had set on the counter. "Guess she's wetter than I thought."

"Is she yours?" Trish wouldn't let go.

Sophie handed the baby over to Trish, who obviously didn't care if the infant soaked her clothes. Now that her hands were free, she reached into Keeton's groceries and pulled out her toaster pastries and the can of soda.

"These are mine." Sophie pointed to the baby. "That's yours."

"Is she yours?" Trish pushed on, leaning to kiss the baby's cheek. "My goodness, she's warm. Do you have anything to give her for this fever?"

"Sick and wet, my lucky day." Sophie headed for the door. "Have fun, Keeton."

Keeton, carrying the baby girl and his bag of groceries, caught up with her as she got into her car.

"Wait."

She sighed and stuck the key in the ignition. "What?"

"I want to talk to you about our land."

"Our land?" She knew exactly what he meant, but she didn't have time for this. Besides that, she had plans for that land.

"You know what I mean, Sophie. You bought the one hundred that joins up with the twenty I bought. A corporation bought the land on the other side of the road."

“So you’re here to buy back West land?”

“That’s why I’m here. That farm meant everything to my granddad, even to my dad, before...”

Yeah, before. She looked away, thought about hollow expressions, loss, giving up. The Wests had sold out to the Parkers, and then the Parkers had split the land up, sold it and moved to Kansas last year.

“Soph, I want to buy it back.”

“Keeton, I don’t have time to talk.”

He leaned in, holding the baby that still hadn’t been changed. She cuddled against his shoulder, crying as he tried to continue the conversation. “We need to talk.”

The stench of the messy, wet baby proved to be more than Sophie could take. She shook her head and moved to get out of the car. Keeton backed up, his words drifting off as she reached for the baby. “We have to change her before we continue this conversation.”

“I can manage.”

She took the baby from him and placed her on the backseat of the car. “Give me a diaper. And you’d better have plenty of wipes. And hand sanitizer.” She gagged a little just thinking about what was waiting for her.

Keeton handed her a diaper and wipes. And then he had the nerve to step back. She tossed him a meaningful look over her shoulder. “Get back here. I’m not doing this alone. You never send a man, or woman, in alone.”

“Right.” She heard him take a deep breath and he stepped close.

The diaper was every bit as bad as she imagined. Worse even. After taking it off and cleaning the baby with wipes, she handed Keeton the offending item. He gasped as she shoved it into his hand.

“Don’t think you get out of this completely.” She smiled over her shoulder at him before turning her attention back to the task at hand.

Keeton took another deep breath and hurried toward the trash. Sophie smiled at the baby. Lucy, blue-eyed and beautiful, smiled back. Sophie lost her heart. And it had been a long time since she’d done that. So long, in fact, she almost expected it to hurt. The heart was, after all, a muscle. She figured hers might be close to atrophy from lack of use.

But she wasn’t about to admit that to anyone. She also wouldn’t admit that she’d been telling God about her loneliness, thinking maybe He could show her a glimpse of His plan.

“Thanks.” Keeton grabbed a few wipes as she taped a new diaper in place. “For your hands. It’s the best I can do.”

She took the wipes and handed him the clean baby. Clean wasn’t really the best word. She needed a bath. Badly.

“I’d take her home and bathe her if I were you.”

Keeton looked down at his little girl. “Bathe her?”

“Yes, with water and soap. It’s a funny little custom most people enjoy daily.”

“Not funny. I don’t know how to bathe a baby.”

“You’ll figure it out. And you should run into Grove and get medicine for her fever. Maybe take her to urgent care. She does feel warm.”

“Great, a sick baby.”

“Probably just a virus. She’ll be fine. So will you.” She smiled at the sight of him holding the baby. “Daddy.”

“Daddy.” He looked down at his daughter, his expression downright wistful and a little confused. “I have a kid.”

“Looks that way.”

And then wistful disappeared, replaced by a look of total shock. “What am I going to do with her?”

“I’d say the same thing parents have done with babies for hundreds of years. Take her home and raise her.”

“I’m a bull rider. I’m on the road almost half my life. I’m living in a crash pad, not a home.”

Bull rider. That reminder had her getting back in her car, away from him, away from the tug on her heart and back into her shell.

“Yes, well, I’d say you’d better make some improvements.”

“You could help me.”

“I did. I changed the nastiest diaper in the history of diapers.”

“Seriously, Soph, I need help.”

He sighed and her resolve to be strong, to not get involved, got a little weak in the knees. Not for Keeton, but the baby. “I’ll be around if you have a problem. I live in the old stone house, just a half mile from you.”

“Right, thanks. And don’t think I’ve forgotten the land. We need to talk.”

“Later.” She had slid behind the wheel of her car and now she glanced at her watch. She hated being late. She had five minutes to get to Grove for a meeting with a contractor.

“Dinner?” He leaned in, holding tight to Lucy.

“Nope. I don’t date bull riders.” She started her car and reached to close the door. He stood there, not moving as she’d given the indication he should do.

“I’m not asking you out. I meant we could talk business over dinner.”

Ouch. That hurt a little for some crazy reason. “Good to know, but I’m not accepting.”

“Fine, I’ll see you later. But we are going to talk about my land.”

“My land.” She backed out of the parking space. She had her own land. It wasn’t Cooper land. She’d saved money left in a trust from her grandparents. She’d saved residual income from her allotted fifty acres and the few oil wells still pumping. She had her own space in the world. Her own land.

Her own life that no one else was involved in. Unfortunately her land used to be West land. What had seemed like a great idea months ago now felt like a giant headache about to happen. Or heartache.

After years of being gone, she hadn’t expected Keeton to suddenly show up back in Dawson.

As she pulled out of the parking lot she glanced in the direction of Keeton's truck. He stood next to it, strapping Lucy into an infant seat. Seeing her glance his way, he waved and then turned toward Lucy.

Kade's brother. A bull rider. The last person she wanted in her life.

Chapter Two

Keeton lugged the infant car seat into the ramshackle house that he now called home. It had electricity, running water and little else to recommend it. The porch sagged in places and a few boards were missing. The living room was long and narrow with only two windows and floors that creaked when he walked across them. He put the baby down on the sofa he'd hauled in a few days ago.

She had fallen asleep halfway home, after sucking down a bottle, burping loudly and then fussing with hiccups for a few minutes. If she'd stay asleep he could carry in groceries and baby stuff he'd bought in Grove.

For a second she fussed and he wondered if she'd wake up. But he remembered something he'd seen women at church do. He rocked the little seat, slow and easy. Lucy cuddled down into the blanket he'd gotten her and sucked on the pacifier.

"Yeah, that's right, I'm a pro at this. Now, don't wake up." He eased toward the door, avoiding spots on the hardwood floors that he knew were prone to creak.

When he got to the truck he could hear work going on at the

construction site across the road. It looked as though some houses were going up on the fifty acres. He shrugged because it wasn't his land, just land he'd thought he might be able to buy.

He grabbed the baby bed out of the back of his truck and headed for the house, nearly tripping over a half-starved cat in the process. "Get out of here."

The cat yowled and ran for the barn. Feral cats. There were probably a dozen of them in the barn. He'd have to start catching them and taking them to the veterinarian in Dawson. One thing at a time. But he wasn't going to let a dozen cats keep reproducing in the one good thing about this property. The barn. He planned on turning that barn into his stable. And then he'd build a hay barn and equipment shed. He had plans. Dreams. His own this time.

As he carried the crib through the house he could hear the continued pounding from the other side of the road. The sound drifted through the open windows along with a nice breeze that felt a little cool for May. He set the crib in the larger of the two bedrooms, leaning it against the bed he'd bought used.

On his way back out to grab the remaining groceries, a cat ran in. He glanced back at the skinny gray tabby. He hated cats. He opened his mouth to yell at the scrawny feline and his attention landed on the sleeping baby in the seat.

Okay, his life as he knew it had ended. In one fell swoop, Becka had delivered the ultimate blow. She'd officially sidelined him, stolen his man-card and parked him square in the role

of fatherhood. He didn't even get to yell at the cat that had meandered into the dining room and was sniffing the corner of the bare room.

"Later, cat." He whispered the threat and backed out the door, giving the cat the look and then pointing two fingers at his own eyes and then back at it, as if it would understand.

Ten minutes later he had groceries and baby paraphernalia in the house and even had the supplies stored in the three cabinets he'd cleaned out with window cleaner and paper towels. He looked around, not really pleased but okay with the cleaning job.

This little kitchen held a lot of memories, most had to do with his grandmother. He'd eaten a lot of fried bologna sandwiches and homemade chocolate chip cookies in this kitchen. Back then the cabinets had been painted bright yellow and the floor had been white-and-yellow linoleum. He didn't know if he'd return to that color scheme but he was looking forward to cleaning things up and making it look the way it used to.

A car driving fast down the country road caught his attention. He hurried to the door just in time to hear a dozen pops, similar to a small-caliber handgun. People across the road yelled. Someone shouted, "No housing project!"

Keeton started out the door, made it halfway to his truck and remembered the baby. He hurried back to the house, banging the front door as he rushed into the room and grabbed the infant carrier. The cat got smart and hightailed it out through a hole in the screen. The mangy thing didn't have a tail.

The strap in the truck played stubborn and it took him a few minutes to get the car seat belted into the truck. After that it only took minutes to get to the building site across the road. A couple of trucks were parked close and a woman stood near the corner of the new foundation making a phone call. She was tall, slim, dressed in a business suit and heels.

No way.

But yes way. She turned around and he was staring at the very lovely Sophie Cooper. She turned her back to him and walked away, still talking on the phone.

Next to him, Lucy cried out, demanding his attention. He leaned over and unbuckled her. When he pulled her out, she settled into the curve of his shoulder as if she'd always been there, made for that spot. It kind of hit him in the heart, how right it felt to hold a baby he'd only known for a few days.

He walked across the grassy field toward the foundation of a house.

“What happened?” he asked one of the men walking around the area, looking for whatever had been thrown at them. Or aimed at them.

The older of the two looked to be a few years younger than Keeton. Shaggy beard and a sweat-stained ball cap, the guy shrugged. “Guess they don't want us here.”

“Did you see if they shot at you or threw something?”

The guy shrugged. “I think they threw fireworks. Ms. Cooper thought it was a gun.”

Keeton smiled and so did the younger man. They walked around the area, looking for remnants of fireworks. He found them closer to the road than the house site. He left them for the police, assuming that's who Sophie had been on the phone with.

He walked back up to the house. There were two trucks, no sedan. Sophie stood near one of the trucks, a beater in worse shape than his. So, she'd been going incognito. He smiled and then laughed.

"You're a contractor now?"

She bristled and took a step back. Man, she was beautiful. The wind whipped her hair around her face and she pushed it back with a gloved hand. Yeah, he liked Sophie the contractor. Even if she didn't want anything to do with Keeton the bull rider.

"I'm helping people build houses. I didn't exactly want it known." She pushed a hand through her hair and looked away. "And I am on the board of Cooper Holdings. I know how to get things done."

"Sophie, you're in Dawson, Oklahoma. Or at least close enough. People are going to find out. Did you really think you could keep something like this a secret?"

She shrugged slim shoulders beneath a clean, blue jacket. She must have gone home and changed after their encounter a few hours ago.

"I don't know. I guess I had hoped to keep it to myself. I keep my truck in the garage. No one knows I have it."

"You're a very sneaky woman." But he wondered aloud, "Why

all the secrecy? It isn't as if you're doing something wrong. Are you?"

She glanced around the property, green with spring rains and warm sunshine. Wildflowers bloomed and the trees were heavy with new leaves. "No, I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm doing something for myself, without everyone in the world being involved."

"Gotcha." But he didn't really get it. He guessed if she wanted to explain, she would.

"The police are going to be here in a little while."

"Yeah, we found the remnants of fireworks."

Pink shaded her cheeks. "Well, it sounded like a gun."

"Why do they want to stop you from building?"

"I guess they don't like the idea of a subdivision."

He glanced around at the gravel drive leading into the place, the tall grass and the ropes used to plot out lots.

"Why do you have a subdivision listed as a nonprofit?"

"It is nonprofit." She sighed and took the squirming, fussy baby from his shoulder. "She's still warm."

"I know. I bought her fever reducer. As soon as I get to the house I'll give her some."

"Right." Sophie whispered to the baby that it would be all better. He kind of wished she'd whisper that to him. Instead she looked up, and when she met his gaze, her smile was gone and her eyes lacked something important. "Keeton, this started as a way for me to help some of our employees. There are good people

trying to buy homes, buy places in the country to raise their kids, and they can't afford to. I bought the land, pooled people with different talents who want to build their own home and brought them all together to help each other build houses at cost. The Amish do it, why can't we?"

"And you're financing this?" Which might explain why she didn't want her family to know.

"No, not completely. I found a resource for low-interest loans."

"You're pretty amazing." He watched her with the baby, watched the way she cuddled the child as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

And he couldn't even get Lucy to take a nap without driving her around in his truck.

Now what? He needed to head back to his house, out of this mess. But he couldn't walk away. Why? He shrugged it off. Either he was staying because of her. Or because he owed it to Kade to look out for her.

If Kade had lived, Sophie would have been his sister-in-law. So yeah, he was doing it for his brother.

* * *

A police car came down the road, giving Sophie a break from the conversation with Keeton. She untangled herself from the smelly little bundle that was Lucy and handed the infant back to her daddy.

"You have to give her a bath today." She released the baby to

her father's arms.

"Yeah, I know."

"You can do this, Keeton."

"I know." He cradled the now wide-awake baby in one arm. Sophie tried not to think about how he looked with that baby. "They really do have how-to books. I bought one at the store."

She shook her head at his admission. "That will help a lot."

"I'm sure it will." He walked next to her as the patrol car pulled in. "Want me to stay?"

"You can go."

He shifted the baby from his left arm to his right. "Suit yourself."

"I'm a big girl."

"I know you are. Just saying, I'm here if you need anything."

"I know you are. And—" she smiled at the baby then raised her gaze to meet his "—I'm just down the road if you need anything."

The words weren't easy. She almost hadn't said them. But it was the right thing to do, offering help.

"Thanks." He touched the brim of his hat. "See you at the rodeo tonight?"

"Probably not."

She watched as he got into his truck and started down the bumpy, gravel drive. Today, nothing made sense. Keeton back in town didn't make sense. Her reaction to seeing him made less sense. Even when she made the point to remind herself he was just another cowboy in faded jeans and dusty boots her heart

waffled, not really agreeing.

Maybe because he hadn't teased her. He hadn't questioned what she was doing and why. She watched him go, biting her bottom lip until it hurt. And then the officer approached, casting a cautious gaze around the area.

"Ms. Cooper?"

"Yes." She turned, giving him her full attention. For the most part.

"I'm Officer Walters."

They leaned against her truck as she recounted the story, ending with an apology for calling him out on something as silly as firecrackers.

"Ma'am, if you felt threatened by their actions, then that's exactly why you should have called. We'll have something on record in case there are other incidents, and if we see a pattern."

"That sounds good." Though she couldn't imagine what pattern they'd see. Fireworks didn't match a criminal profile that she knew of. It appeared to be more a case of overactive imagination on her part.

Jeff and Gabe told what they remembered, and then they took the police officer to the spot where they'd found the firecrackers. She watched as he shoved the evidence into a plastic bag and walked back up to where she waited.

"I've got a description of the car and what you think the passenger looked like. I'll take this in and we'll call you if we find anything. If you do see that car again, call. And if you can get

a license number without putting yourself in danger, that would help.”

“Thank you, Officer.” Sophie watched him leave, and then she glanced at her watch. It was almost two o’clock on a Saturday afternoon. The two guys standing in front of her looked as if they would rather be anywhere but here.

“What now, Ms. Cooper?” Jeff, tall and lanky, picked up his tool bag and strapped it around his waist. He pushed his ball cap down on thinning hair.

“Let’s go home, guys. The supplies are here. If the two of you and a few others want to do more on the frame next week, everything is ready to go.”

“That sounds good.” Gabe picked up the toolbox he’d left near her truck. “Call if you need anything at all.”

“Thanks, Gabe.” She smiled at the younger man. He was single and unemployed for the time being so he had signed on to help a few of his married friends build houses. His experience in so many areas of construction made him a valuable part of the team.

After the two of them left she got into the old truck she’d bought a few weeks ago. She eased down the gravel drive, and at the road she didn’t turn toward her house. Instead she turned left, and then into the driveway of the old West homestead.

Keeton’s truck was parked close to the front door. She sat for a minute staring at the old farmhouse with the dark green siding. She’d loved this place years ago when his grandparents

were alive. It always reminded her of trees in the summer. Dark green with brown trim around the windows and brown shingles. Irises bloomed profusely around the house, leftovers from tubers his grandmother had planted. When she bought her house a few years ago, she'd dug up several and replanted them around her front porch.

The front door opened. Keeton walked out and then leaned against the post. She laughed because he looked cool, pretty cute, actually. Until the post he chose to lean against wobbled and came loose. He fell to the side and righted himself.

His smile zoomed across the yard, bright with white teeth that flashed.

“You getting out?” he called out to her.

She shouldn't. Not if she had any sense at all. She'd always been the Cooper kid most likely to use common sense. Lately something had happened. Maybe an early midlife crisis?

Instead of waving goodbye and leaving, she got out. Her heart raced ahead of her. And then guilt rushed in. It ached deep down, tangling with the past and with this moment.

“Don't look like you just stole the teacher's apple.”

“Why would a teacher ever really want an apple?” Was that the only thing she could come back with? “I mean, really, wouldn't she be glad if someone took it? Wouldn't she prefer a student give her chocolate?”

“You're overthinking this.”

She cleared her throat and nodded. “Of course I am. I'm

Sophie Cooper, I always overthink.”

“Right, and where has that gotten you?”

For a moment she thought about that question. But then she heard the baby from inside the house, crying. “I think someone wants you.”

“Right. Are you coming in?” He headed toward the house, not waiting for her. “You didn’t answer. Where has overthinking gotten you?”

He glanced back over his shoulder as he walked up the steps of the porch.

“Overthinking has kept me out of trouble.” And kept her heart virtually pain free for sixteen years. Poor atrophied heart. It needed serious physical therapy if she ever planned on using it again.

She followed Keeton through the front door. He had already picked up Lucy and had her cradled against his chest. “She’s pretty warm.”

Sophie kissed the baby’s brow. “Very. Have you given her the medicine?”

“Yeah, when I got back.”

“And a bath?”

“Not yet.” He smiled and there was something different about a cowboy smile when the cowboy was holding a baby. “I haven’t read the book.”

Sophie reached for the baby and he handed Lucy over.

“Run lukewarm water in the sink. We’ll start there. I’ll give

you a crash course in baby bathing and you can read your how-to manual later.”

“Thanks, Sophie, I owe you.”

“No, you don’t.” She followed him into the kitchen. He turned on the tap and washed out the sink. “Do you have baby soap?”

“Yeah, let me get the water going and I’ll go get the supplies I bought at the store.”

Regret—Sophie had a lot. And after today, she’d have more. Hip against the counter, she watched as he plugged the sink and then rummaged through the plastic bags on the counter, pulling out the soap, washcloth and towel. He held up a little sleeper, pink with ponies on the front.

“Sweet. You did good.” Sophie spread the towel on the counter and slipped off the dirty sleeper. She dropped it on the floor and waited for it to get up and walk away on its own. It was that dirty.

“Now what?”

“You can throw that sleeper away.”

“Done.” He picked it up and tossed it in the trash. A second later he was at her side again. He smelled good. Spicy with a hint of a pine forest mixed in. It was the kind of scent that made a woman want to lean in close.

If it were any other man. If she was any other woman. She sighed and let go of need, held on to strength.

“In the bath she goes.” Sophie lifted the baby, and before putting her in the water, tested it to make sure it wasn’t too hot or cold. “Perfect. Maybe this will help break that fever. And I’m

sure she'll feel better."

"Soph, I appreciate this."

"Of course you do, because you think I'm going to do all of the work. Surprise." She cradled the baby in the water. Lucy tested the surface of the water with pudgy little fingers, and then she splashed just a little. "Hold her like this and then squirt a little soap on the washcloth. It doesn't take much to wash a baby, Keeton. Even her hair. There isn't much of it."

"Right, of course." He swallowed loud and she looked up, smiling at the bead of perspiration across his brow.

"Easy-peasy." She moved a little but still cradled the baby on her left arm. "Your turn."

"She's already clean."

"I know, but I want you to be able to do this on your own."

"I can." He cleared his throat. "Seriously, Soph, I can do this."

"You could hire a nanny."

"I have skills."

Yeah, she thought.

He reached for his baby girl and Sophie moved her hands to make room for his. She glanced up and he looked down. It felt suddenly very warm in that little kitchen.

"I can handle it without a nanny." He repeated her actions and Lucy giggled, happy to be clean and to be cooler. "She hasn't eaten a lot today."

"She needs liquids. Especially now, with a fever. If she gets enough formula, give her water." She placed the towel over his

shoulder and he looked a little stricken. “Take her out before she gets chilled.”

“I can’t believe this is my life.” He lifted Lucy out of the bathwater and wrapped the towel around her. Sophie took the child from his arms.

“Believe it, Keeton West, this is your life.” She held Lucy close. “What were you planning, coming back here?”

He grabbed a diaper and the sleeper. Sophie put the baby on the counter and made quick work of putting a diaper and the sleeper on Lucy. A little part of her liked that he looked in awe.

“I thought I’d come back and reclaim what should have been mine.” He held his daughter.

The lighthearted moment of seconds ago dissolved. “I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” He leaned, brushing a brotherly kiss on the side of her head. She paused midbutton on the sleeper and looked up at him.

“I know it isn’t—wasn’t my fault. I’m sorry, Keeton, for everything. I’m sorry for the years we’ve all lost, being sorry, being guilty, being alone.” She looked away, because it was easier to focus on Lucy. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know.”

Did he really? She thought he probably still felt guilty. He’d been a kid, really. Even though at eighteen and nineteen they’d thought they were grown, thought they knew everything.

She handed him the baby girl that had his eyes. And in those

eyes she saw a little bit of Kade, the West she'd planned on marrying. In a jewelry box at home she had the ring he'd given her, a promise that someday they'd get engaged, get married.

She also had a rose, taken from one of the flower arrangements on his casket. And in a notebook, hidden away in her dresser, she had a note from Keeton, telling her how sorry he was for what had happened. He blamed himself. He would always blame himself.

And he'd spent his life trying to earn the national bull-riding championship Kade had wanted. He was still chasing Kade's dreams.

She wanted to tell him that. She wanted to tell him to let it go and find what he wanted. Maybe this farm was it? But she wouldn't go back to other memories, of the afternoon of the funeral and finding comfort in Keeton's arms.

Keeton wasn't the only one who felt guilty.

Chapter Three

Keeton walked Sophie out the front door. Lucy, bathed and cooler to the touch, slept soundly in her new crib. Sophie had promised to watch his daughter while he rode at a local bull ride that evening. He'd brought it up. She'd offered. For the baby, not for him.

A crash in the field caught his attention as they stood on the porch. He glanced toward the barn, saw a flash of red-gold.

“What's that?”

Sophie looked in the direction he pointed and she laughed.

Okay, so whatever it was, she found it amusing. He watched as the animal tramped through the overgrown brush and scrub trees that he'd be cutting down in a few days. A mule appeared. It saw them, snorted, tossed its big head and then raced off in the other direction. Before Keeton could comment, the mule jumped the fallen tree that leaned against the corral.

"That was Lucky the mule." She shaded her eyes with her hand and watched. And he watched her.

"You find Lucky on the loose amusing?"

She turned, still smiling. The girl his brother had planned to marry still lurked in her eyes, still smiled up at him. But she was a woman. A beautiful woman. One he would have liked knowing. Would still like to know. That brought up a whole bag of "if only" that he didn't plan on getting into.

"Lucky belongs to my brother Lucky, but then, Lucky doesn't belong to anyone. Lucky, my brother, bought him six months ago, as a yearling. He brought him home, put him in the corral. The next day, Lucky was gone. Got that?"

"I think. Lucky your brother has a mule named Lucky, which you named. He's been running loose for six months?"

"Yep."

"Unbelievable." He turned his attention back to the field, looking for the mule. "Why don't they catch him?"

"They can't touch him."

"Gotcha." He followed her down the steps. "You sure you don't mind watching Lucy for me?"

“No, I don’t mind. But I’m not going to watch you ride a bull.”

“I won’t get hurt.”

She drew in a breath and turned away from him. Too late. He reached for her arm and she shook her head. “I’m going home, Keeton. I’ll watch the baby.”

“Soph, I’m sorry.” He reached for her hand and drew her back to him. “I’m sorry.”

“Keeton, let’s stop this. We’re both adults now. It was a long time ago. It hurt. But it hadn’t hurt...”

“Until I came back.”

“Yeah, something like that. Stop bringing it up. Stop apologizing. Stop living in the past. God doesn’t want us living in the past. This is today. We have a life today that we need to concentrate on.”

He wondered if she’d really been concentrating on living this life. He held her left hand, the one that had never worn a ring. For someone moving on, living in the present, she was doing a lot of holding on to the past.

But he was the last person who would lecture her on that. He was still riding bulls. He didn’t love the sport. He didn’t really care about the championship or world titles. For years he’d been trying to win the title his brother had wanted.

He’d been trying to put his family back together.

“Okay, no more apologizing.” He smiled like he meant it and she responded, like she meant it. And neither of them did.

Sophie sighed. “I have to go. Please don’t tell my family about

the land.”

“Okay.” He wanted to ask why, but he figured he got it. When a person grew up a Cooper, they didn’t have much that was just theirs. Including secrets.

A few minutes later her truck pulled onto the road. Keeton walked back into the house. He stood in the living room, waiting for the past to stop rushing at him. As a little kid he’d spent a lot of time in this house until his grandparents had moved to town. He and Kade had spent summer nights on the front porch, hoping for a little breeze because there hadn’t been air-conditioning in the house.

His grandma used to sit in a flowery chair in front of the window and fan herself with a magazine. He smiled, remembering images that hadn’t been this clear in years. This house. This land. It had been a part of him. This house and the one down the road where he’d grown up. That house now belonged to a family named Matthews.

He’d driven past today and saw that there were bikes in the front yard, a basketball hoop and horses in the corral.

At twenty he’d helped his parents pack it all up and move to Tulsa. They hadn’t been able to move on after losing Kade. They’d tried to get back to what had been their lives, and it hadn’t happened. There’d been too much guilt, too many accusations and way too much pain.

He shook his head as he walked through the empty rooms. Paneled walls. Hardwood floors that sagged in places. It was

livable but it needed a lot of work. And that mangy cat had slipped back inside. The thing yowled at him, wanting food. He opened a can of tuna and sat it on the floor.

“Don’t get too comfortable in here, Mangy.”

The cat yowled again. And then the baby cried. Keeton tossed his hat on the counter and walked down the hall to the bedroom. Lucy stopped crying when she saw him. He smiled at that.

He’d had her for two days. He’d known about her for two days. When he thought about how unfair that was, it made him madder than anything. Becka had kept him from the best thing in his life. He didn’t really know what to do with a baby. But she definitely took the title for best thing ever.

The big question at the moment was how to be a bull rider and a single dad. That even put getting his land back from Sophie on hold, or made it less important somehow. He picked up his baby girl and held her close. She smelled a lot better.

“You smell good, little girl. I was afraid that other smell was permanent.”

She smiled a soft baby smile and he held her easy in one arm while he reached for the bottle and the soft blanket. She felt warm again. He’d bought a book on babies and had read warnings about high fevers, but also about not rushing to the doctor for every virus. So how did he know what to do with that advice?

“What in the world are we going to do about this fever?”

She cooed and he knew at that moment that no one had better ever hurt his little girl. They’d have to deal with him.

He was a dad. A single dad in a house without furniture. A single dad without a significant other to give him a helping hand. He'd faced some pretty mean bulls over the years, but he'd never faced anything that frightened him as much as the prospect of raising one tiny little girl.

The thought spun around in his mind. He was now responsible for another person's future. A little person, yeah, but she wouldn't always be little.

Someday she'd be a teenager. She'd have boyfriends. He'd have to hurt them.

"Baby, you are never, ever going to date."

She cooed again and smiled a little. Yeah, in fifteen years she wouldn't be smiling at him like that. With that thought in his mind he started packing the diaper bag to take Lucy to Sophie.

* * *

Sophie crumpled the note she'd found on her door when she got back from Keeton's. But on second thought she smoothed it out and dropped it on the kitchen counter. Because, what if something happened?

A note warning her that she shouldn't build a subdivision on farmland might be of interest to the police. If something should happen. If. But it probably meant nothing. She couldn't think of a reason why her subdivision would upset anyone.

The only person slightly bothered by it would be Keeton, and only because the land had once belonged to his family.

Sophie opened a cabinet door and reached for her staple—

peanut butter. She spread it on a slice of bread, then covered that with a layer of blackberry jam.

The perfect food.

She carried the one slice of bread with toppings to the kitchen table and sat down, putting her feet up on the chair next to the one she sat on. Her home. Her life. No one to tell her to sit up straight, pull her hair back, eat healthy.

If she wanted to, she could listen to loud music all night. She could leave every light in the house on. She could wear her pajamas all day. Bonus, her sister Heather wasn't lurking, waiting to straighten pillows or make the bed. Although she did stop in from time to time with a new picture for the wall.

Being an adult meant no more sharing. No more brothers and sisters poking around in her life. No man cluttering things up.

No more quiet secrets at night after everyone went to bed. Yes, she did miss that part. She missed that Heather had always been there for her. She missed Mia's silly stories.

But she loved peace and quiet. Her own space.

The picture on the table next to her mocked her with its silliness. Her new sister-in-law Madeline had given her the photograph in a silver frame, a thank-you for helping with Madeline and Jackson's wedding. A picture of Sophie fumbling as the bouquet Madeline tossed practically fell into her arms. She pushed the picture facedown and snarled at it.

As she finished off the last bite of sandwich she heard tires crunching on gravel and the low hum of an engine. She leaned

to peek out the front screen door, saw that it was Keeton and relaxed. But then she panicked. She looked down at the sweatpants she'd cut off at the knees and the crazy tie-dyed T-shirt she'd changed into when she got home.

She jumped and ran down the hall, a surge of panic shooting adrenaline through her veins. She would not get caught like this.

Before she could put her plate in the sink and make it through the living room to the stairs that led to her bedroom, Keeton stood at the front door. He grinned through the screen door and wiggled two fingers. In his other arm he held the precious bundle that was his daughter.

Two reactions. She wanted to run and hide. She wanted to stop and stare at the man on her front porch. She had to act quickly.

“Come in, I’m going to change.”

He stepped in before she could run. “Why?”

But he smirked a cute little grin and gave her the once-over. She should point out that he needed to shave and his worn-out jeans were in need of replacing. She walked away from him, knowing he'd follow.

“What’s going on?”

Coffee. She needed a cup of coffee. She walked down the hall to the kitchen. Keeton’s boots clunked on the wood floor. If she gave herself a few minutes she could face him and not be at loose ends. She didn’t do this, this chaotic dance around men—insecure, uncertain. Sophie Cooper knew how to be confident.

She reached for the coffeepot, saw the note on the counter.

Before he could reach her she grabbed it and slipped it in her pocket.

“Do you want coffee?”

Keeton held Lucy out to her. “Yeah, I want coffee. I’ll make it because I also don’t want to pick up glass from the broken coffeepot when you drop it. What’s up with you?”

Keeton. A crazy note on her front door. She didn’t know where to start. She didn’t want to start.

Rather than answering, she took Lucy and sat down at the butcher-block table in the center of the kitchen. Lucy, soft and smelling of lavender and chamomile, cooed. She still felt warm.

“I’m worried about this baby.”

Keeton looked back at them, and then poured water into the coffeepot. “I gave her the medicine. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Maybe urgent care.”

“Yeah, I think I might need to do that. Let’s stop beating around the bush. Why don’t you tell me about that piece of paper you slipped in your pocket when you thought I wasn’t looking?”

“Paper?” Heat warmed her neck and then her cheeks.

“You’re a horrible liar.”

“I know.” She leaned her forehead against Lucy’s. “Sweet baby, you need to get over this virus.”

“Note.”

“Baby trumps note. We need to take her to the doctor.”

“We?” He leaned against the counter, his elbows behind him

resting on the counter top. He wasn't particularly tall. Most bull riders weren't. He appeared tall. Maybe that unbelievable self-confidence the West men oozed. She sighed. Kade had had it, too.

She wondered what kind of man he'd have been if he'd lived. Would they have gotten married? Or would they have grown up in a few years and realized it was just a crush?

"Soph? About the note? And then we'll talk about Lucy and the doctor."

"The note warned me to stop building a subdivision on farmland."

"I didn't write it."

"I know you didn't." She looked up, making strong eye contact with him. "I know you didn't."

"Good. But we have to find out who did. I want to know that you're safe here."

"I'm safe. I'm a Cooper. I can fight with the best of them. And shoot a gun."

He grinned and shook his head. Without asking, he pulled cups out of the cabinet and started pouring coffee. "Sugar?"

"Nope."

"Black coffee." He glanced back again. "And you have peanut butter on your chin."

She rubbed fast, and then wiped her fingers on a napkin. "I don't."

"You have so many surprising little habits, Sophie." He carried

two cups of coffee and sat down across from her. “I figured if it’s a virus she’ll run a fever for a couple of days and be over it. Right? Antibiotics won’t cure a virus.”

“I suppose. But she’s so little, I worry about her fever getting too high.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on that. So far it’s stayed under 102.”

“I’d make her an appointment tomorrow, then. If she isn’t better.”

“Thanks, Soph. So will you still watch her for me tonight while I go ride bulls in Dawson?”

That’s why he was there. She’d somehow managed to forget. She snuggled the baby and thought about rocking her to sleep, the two of them dozing on the sofa together. Keeton’s baby, not hers. She felt a little alone for a moment, even with the two of them right there with her. Because they weren’t hers.

“I’ll watch her.”

“I have a can of formula and extra diapers in the diaper bag.”

“Okay.” She stood when he stood. “Be careful tonight.”

He plucked at a strand of her hair and nodded once. “I will. I always am. Soph, it hardly ever happens that way—the way it did...”

“I know.” And she didn’t usually cry. But her eyes burned and if he didn’t leave, she would.

He didn’t leave. Instead he leaned and sweetly kissed her. She closed her eyes and for a moment she needed this, needed him. She resurfaced when memories of another moment in his arms

pushed their way into her mind.

Before she could make sense of it all, he stepped back. One simple kiss and he undid all of her carefully groomed self-control. She couldn't allow that.

She gathered herself, her wits, and stood a little straighter.

“Keeton, don't.”

He tipped his hat. “I know.”

“We can't.”

“I know.” His smile didn't beam this time, instead it looked a little sad, a little sorry. And so was she. “I know.”

He walked down the hall back to the front door. She followed him. “Keeton, it isn't you.”

At the front door he turned, smiling again. “It's never been me.”

“That isn't what I meant.” But it was. And wasn't. She was making a royal mess of things. The baby whimpered against her shoulder and Keeton walked out the door, letting it thud behind him.

“Goodbye,” she whispered, and then she whispered a prayer. “God, keep him safe.”

What if he got hurt? Then what? What about the baby? She rushed out the door, wanting to stop him, to tell him he had a little girl and something could happen to him. Too late, his truck pulled out onto the road and turned in the direction of Dawson.

“It's you and me, baby girl. And we're going to be doing lots of praying tonight.”

Chapter Four

The Dawson Rodeo Grounds hadn't changed much over the years. Keeton liked that about Dawson, that it didn't change. It hadn't gotten sucked up in urban sprawl. Mainly because there wasn't an urban area close enough. Sometimes they got lost tourists looking for Grand Lake. Mostly, it was just Dawson and the folks who'd been here for generations. He liked the slow pace of life, knowing neighbors, knowing the roads, the houses and what made people tick.

Not that he could figure out Sophie Cooper. Each time he thought he had her pegged, she shifted and left him scratching his head.

He pulled into the grassy parking area of the arena and parked next to a beater that had seen better days. His old truck was in similar shape but he had a new one on the way. As he stepped out of his pickup a voice shouted his name. He turned and waved at Jeremy Hightree. It was thanks to Jeremy and his skill with bikes that Keeton had money saved up to buy back his family spread.

The money would stay in the bank for now, because he'd only been able to purchase the twenty that his grandparents' home sat on.

Jeremy headed his way. "I guess you really are back?"

"I'm back." He reached into his truck for chaps and a bull rope.

"So, rumor has it you've got a kid." Jeremy leaned against the side of Keeton's truck, pretending to fiddle with the strap on his

chaps. Keeton figured Jeremy was more than a little interested because of his own past. He was Sophie's half brother. A Cooper, and he hadn't known that fact for most of his life.

"I guess I do."

"Kind of a surprise, wasn't it?"

Keeton looked up. "Jeremy, surprise doesn't even begin to explain it."

"Where is she?"

Now, how did he get out of answering that question? Might as well answer because odds were, Jeremy and most of Dawson knew where Lucy was. "Sophie's watching her."

Jeremy grinned big, the way Keeton had kind of guessed he would. "That's good. She's probably a great babysitter."

"Right." Keeton coiled his bull rope and walked away. "Later."

Of course Jeremy followed him. "Do you need any help over at the old homestead?"

Now, that question had merit. "Probably in the next few days. I'm going to have to patch the roof, replace a couple of windows and probably rebuild the porch."

At that, Jeremy laughed. "I meant do you want me to bring you a casserole or something. I hadn't really planned on hard labor."

"You can bring me a casserole and help me patch the roof."

"I suppose I could." Jeremy pointed to a man in black jeans and a white shirt. "Dave has the list, he'll let you know when you're up and what bull you're on."

"Thanks."

And then Jeremy laughed, his attention focused on the parking lot. “Well, what do you know? Is that Sophie parking her car?”

“Never.”

“No, I’m sure it is.” Jeremy pointed to the big sedan and the woman getting out.

Gone were her pretty amazing sweatpants and the tie-dyed T-shirt. Back was the Sophie in business formal. She had his baby in her arms. It shouldn’t feel so perfect, seeing her with his baby. But everything about this was out of place. Sophie in her dress slacks and blouse. Lucy in her arms. His life had somehow gotten shaken up to the point that he didn’t recognize it as his life.

“See you later.” Jeremy slapped his back and walked away.

“Right.” Keeton walked toward Sophie. She smiled a little and held Lucy close. “What are you doing here? Is Lucy okay?”

“Lucy still has a little fever.” She bit down on her bottom lip, and then looked up, letting him see tears in her hazel eyes. He had a hard time not pulling her close. He stood his ground, though, waiting for her explanation.

“What’s wrong?”

She sniffled. He’d never seen her as the type to get emotional over nothing. She raised her chin a notch and got control back.

“I couldn’t sit there and wait for you to come home. I kept thinking about you being here, riding bulls. And Lucy. She’s so little. What if...”

Even with the glimmer of tears, her voice remained strong.

He stopped her with a slight shake of his head. “Don’t.

Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“This doesn’t count toward the finals. You don’t have to ride here.”

“I want to ride here.”

He used to want to ride here. He wanted to be seventeen again, living his dream, waking up each morning to a family that was whole. For some crazy reason he kept thinking he could get that back. His parents, his brother, his life.

Buying the land had been the plan. The way to get his life back.

Sophie stared at him, as if she knew exactly what thoughts were going through his mind. And she looked sorry, for her and for him.

“Sophie, this is what I do. I ride bulls.”

“I know.”

He wanted to hold her but he knew she wouldn’t want that. She had her stronger-than-steel look on her face. She wouldn’t melt. She wouldn’t fall apart.

“So wish me luck?”

“Of course, luck. And some prayers.” She swayed with Lucy in her arms. “I thought it would be easier to watch instead of being at home worrying, not knowing.”

“I understand.” He let out a sigh as they announced bull riding directly after barrel racing. “I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll find a place to sit.”

“Soph—” he stepped close because he couldn’t just walk away

“—she looks good in your arms.”

Before she could protest or call him a choice name, he walked away. But he couldn't stop smiling. Not even when they told him which bull he'd be riding. He'd drawn one of the meanest bulls the Coopers owned.

* * *

Jackson Cooper grinned, and then laughed. “You sure you don't want to take a sick day, Keet?”

“I can ride this bull with my eyes closed.”

“I think you'll want your eyes closed and some serious prayers before you ride him.” Jackson walked away from the fence he'd been leaning against. His smile disappeared. Great.

“I can handle him, Jackson.”

“I know you can. But tell me this. What are you doing with Sophie?”

“She's watching Lucy for me. That's all.”

“Mind a little advice?”

Keeton shrugged and pretended this conversation meant nothing. But Jackson had a pretty serious look on his face that warned him to tread easy. “Sure.”

“Don't hurt her.”

“I'm not planning on it. She's always been a friend.”

“I think we both know that isn't true.”

“Jackson, there's been a lot of years lived since Kade passed. There's been a lot of time and distance.”

“I know. And here you both are, still stuck in the past.”

“I’m not stuck in the past.”

“You’re here because you can’t let go.”

“I’m here to get back what I lost.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Sophie’s on the list of things you lost?”

“No, Sophie was never on the list of things I had to lose.”

At thirty-six, he was too stinking old for this conversation. He pushed his hat back and looked Jackson Cooper straight in the eye. “Jackson, with all due respect, back off.”

“She’s my sister.”

“We’re not teenagers. She’s not a kid you have to watch over. I don’t have to declare my intentions like this is some Old West drama.”

Jackson laughed. “You have intentions?”

“I have to ride a bull. And then I plan on ignoring you.”

He walked past Jackson and climbed the steps to the platform where he would wait to get on his bull. The old Holstein bull the Coopers owned bellowed in his chute, raising off his front legs in an attempt to climb out of the metal enclosure.

It kind of made a guy wonder why he did this for a living. It also kept him praying. But his attention strayed to the stands, looking for Sophie with his little girl. He spotted them. Sophie sat near the bottom of the bleachers, next to a woman he didn’t know. She had a cola in one hand and his baby in her arms.

Things had definitely changed. For the better? Yeah, he thought so.

* * *

Sophie hadn't attended a rodeo in years. She never watched bull riding. Tonight she had to. She'd tried cuddling up with Lucy, pretending she didn't care. But after thirty minutes at home, thinking about Keeton on a bull, she couldn't take it. She had to be here, to watch. As if being here would stop something bad from happening.

She knew whatever would happen would happen with or without her presence. She knew that God really could take care of things without her help.

But logic had obviously flown out the window, along with common sense and a few other personal strengths. At this point, emotion seemed to be in control. And when had that ever happened to her?

Okay, not a question she wanted to answer.

She resituated herself on the wooden bench and pretended she really didn't care what happened in the arena. She didn't care that Dylan, her little brother, had just settled onto the back of a bull.

Travis, older than Dylan by a couple of years, stood in the arena, ready to rescue their little brother if need be. Jackson had the role of pick-up guy, sitting on his big chestnut gelding, reins loose in his hands, but the horse in control.

Sophie's new sister-in-law Elizabeth leaned close. "It really will be okay."

Sophie nodded but she couldn't ask Elizabeth what she knew. Elizabeth was sweet. She was kind; she wanted to comfort

Sophie. And she knew very little of the turmoil inside Sophie at that moment.

“I know.”

Elizabeth reached for her hand. “I’ll pray, too.”

Sophie nodded again and this time she couldn’t answer. The gate flew open. Sophie had always thought of herself as a strong person. She knew how to work past her pain, how to get things done.

She closed her eyes as her little brother came spinning out of the chute on the back of a bull. She squeezed them tighter when she heard the crowd scream. Elizabeth’s hand on hers held tight.

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