



Western Romance®

A young girl with brown hair and a pink bow is sitting on a large wooden log. She is wearing a light blue denim jacket over a white lace-trimmed dress and brown cowboy boots. She has her hands raised in a playful gesture. The background is a large red wooden barn with a weathered roof. The scene is set outdoors with some tall grass in the foreground.

THE KENTUCKY  
COWBOY'S  
BABY

HEIDI HORMEL

Heidi Hormel

**The Kentucky Cowboy's Baby**

«HarperCollins»

## **Hormel H.**

The Kentucky Cowboy's Baby / H. Hormel — «HarperCollins»,

HOME AT LAST  
Pepper Bourne has big plans for her stepdaddy's Arizona ranch. The physician's assistant dreams of opening a community garden for Angel Crossing's neediest. The only thing standing in her way is the tall, rugged cowboy who just inherited the property! Former bull rider AJ McCreary gave up the rodeo to raise his baby girl, selling the ranch is the only way he can support her now. While Pepper's claim on the property may be uncertain, there's no denying her claim on AJ's heart. He's ready to become a family man. But can he prove it to the one woman who makes his family complete?

## Содержание

The Kentucky Cowboy's Baby	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26



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"I can be a jerk—just ask around—but not tonight."

AJ's words drifted over Pepper's head, making her hair move.

She relaxed into his embrace, surrounded not only by his warmth but by something more. A comfort that surprised her because she wanted to lean into him, let him take on her fear, disappointment and anger. Just for ten seconds. Yes, for ten seconds, she could let someone else take on the responsibility. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face into his shoulder, into the muscled solidity of him. Substantial and safe.

She counted off the seconds in her head, but somewhere around six, her brain stopped and she let herself just feel. He pulled her more tightly against him. She wanted to melt into him.

"Pepper?"

She looked up at him. His gaze roamed over her face, and she felt herself soften and heat. She tipped up her chin, offering herself to him.

No. She couldn't. She needed to step away. She needed to—

[Dear Reader,](#)

Kentucky and cowboy don't go together like peanut butter and jelly...or do they? I watched the television series *Justified*, featuring a Kentucky lawman in cowboy hat and boots. That kernel of an idea led to my next story in the *Angel Crossing, Arizona* series.

AJ McCreary, my Bluegrass State cowboy (who isn't a lawman), has had a rough few months, finding out he has a daughter and her mama wants cash in exchange for custody. Then his mentor and friend dies. AJ quits bull riding to care for his baby girl and heads west to look for work and pay his respects at his friend's memorial. That's when things get really interesting. He meets his mentor's stepdaughter, Pepper Bourne, a practical and caring physician's assistant who is committed to keeping *Angel Crossing* healthy and whole. With a cast of characters both human and animal, these two find themselves at odds and in love.

As I write new stories, I don't forget about my other characters, bringing them back for guest appearances. I love being able to see what they are up to and how life is treating them. Next in *Angel Crossing*, the retired bull rider/mayor and baby brother of the Leigh sisters meets up with his first love and rides again.

If you want to know more about my inspirations and musings or drop me a note, check out my website and blog at [heidihormel.net](http://heidihormel.net), where you can also sign up for my newsletter. Or connect with me at [Facebook.com/authorheidihormel](https://www.facebook.com/authorheidihormel), [Twitter.com/heidihormel](https://twitter.com/heidihormel) and [Pinterest.com/hhormel](https://www.pinterest.com/hhormel).

Yee-haw,

Heidi Hormel

# The Kentucky Cowboy's Baby

## Heidi Hormel



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

With stints as an innkeeper and radio talk show host, HEIDI HORMEL settled into her true calling as a writer by spending years as a reporter (covering the story of the rampaging elephants Debbie and Tina) and as a PR flunky (staying calm in the face of Cookiegate). Now she is happiest penning romances with a wink and a wiggle.

A small-town girl from the Snack Food Capital of the World, Heidi has trotted over a good portion of the globe, from Tombstone in Arizona to Loch Ness in Scotland to the depths of Death Valley. She draws on all of these experiences for her books, but especially her annual visits to the Grand Canyon State for her Angel Crossing, Arizona series.

Heidi is on the web at [heidihormel.net](http://heidihormel.net), as well as socially out there at [Facebook.com/authorheidihormel](https://www.facebook.com/authorheidihormel), [Twitter.com/heidihormel](https://twitter.com/heidihormel) and [Pinterest.com/hhormel](https://www.pinterest.com/hhormel).

Thanks to my editors, who don't say no  
when I suggest llamas, alpacas or cowgirls  
and cowboys who don't fit the mold.

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Extract](#)

Copyright  
Chapter One

EllaJayne was gone. The car seat in the back of the battered king-cab pickup was empty, the door hanging open. Even flat-as-a-pancake Oggie, her toy doggie, had vanished. AJ had been right there, fixing the loose hose while his daughter slept in her safest-for-its-price-tag car seat. He'd been standing right there. He hadn't heard a damned thing. He should have a loyal dog so no one could sneak up and— Call the cops, his mind snapped.

He pulled out his phone as he scanned the dusty lot stretching behind a stuccoed cement-block building. Empty, except for a purple SUV. He ran, his well-worn boots kicking up whirls of bleached-out grit. No EllaJayne in or behind the small SUV. How could he have forgotten she was Houdini in a diaper? No sign of her in the dirt-and-gravel parking lot baking in the Arizona high-noon sun. The emergency operator picked up as he raced back to his grimy truck for one more check in every nook, cranny and crevice.

“What’s your emergency?” the operator asked.

“My daughter’s gone.” He ran for the short alley that ran along the building and onto the main street. “Shit,” he said.

“Excuse me, sir?”

He kept moving. “Get the police out here. She might have gone onto the road.”

“I’ll need your location, please.”

Her voice was too calm. He wanted to reach through the phone and tell her that his baby girl had disappeared. Instead, as he panted for breath against the heat and the pain in his hip, he said, “I’m in Angel Crossing. I only stopped for a minute to check the truck before I went to find Gene’s —” He stopped the rush of words. None of that mattered. “My daughter is sixteen months old. She has dark hair and eyes.”

“What’s she wearing, sir?”

“Purple shirt with sparkles.”

“A little more information, then the police will contact you. I’ll need your full name, place of—”

He hung up. He couldn't run and talk. They should be sending police, the K-9 unit, not asking him stupid questions. He stared up and down the uneven, broken sidewalk that stretched in front of the bright-colored facades of empty buildings. Had someone driven in and stolen his daughter while he'd had his head under the hood? A wailing, escalating cry drifted to him. He squinted without his hat brim to shade his McCreary-gray eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of his sturdy toddler daughter, with hair as dark as his own, its straight-as-a-preacher silkiness direct from her out-of-the-picture mama. He took off, ignoring the sharp bite of pain in his hip and back.

Was the crying closer? The familiar piercing sob was one he'd come to dread, his daughter letting him know he had no business calling himself her daddy.

“EllaJayne. Where are you, baby?” He kept moving as he yelled, not caring that his Kentucky twang had thickened. The cries stopped. He stopped. Where the hell was she? Dear Lord, he'd been so sure he was better than any foster parent or her mama could be. Now he'd lost his baby girl.

After searching another five minutes without hearing her voice again, AJ turned back the way he'd come, moving as fast as he could down the uneven concrete. Where the heck was she? He stepped into a hole where there should have been sidewalk and sharp pain shot down his leg. He hobbled two more steps until the sign for the police department and town hall sprang up like an oasis in the desert. He raced toward it and yanked open the door into a narrow lobby with plastic signs lining the walls. He scanned them looking for...on the right, a small sign in red declared: POLICE. He hurried to the door. Beyond it, a battered metal desk with neat in and out trays stood empty. He didn't hear anything.

“I want to report a missing child.” He raised his voice, needing to talk with someone, right now, or he'd—

“What the hell’s going on?” asked a tall, blond, unexpectedly familiar man. “AJ? What are you doing here?”

“My daughter.” He pulled in as deep a breath as he could with his heart pounding enough to hurt his ribs. “Are you a cop now? I need a search party.”

“Not a cop. Mayor. So you’re the daddy.”

“Where is my daughter?” he asked slowly, with menace. He wasn’t playing here. No matter this was Danny Leigh, his old partner in crime. The big blond angel—fitting that he was mayor of a place called Angel Crossing—to AJ’s dark-haired and black-hatted devil.

“Pepper said she found the baby walking around by herself.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t mean to tell you your business, but—”

AJ had been right there under the hood while Baby Girl slept after hours of crying. He’d been right there. “I’m getting my daughter.” AJ turned from Danny, whom he’d last seen at a rodeo in Tulsa. Now it seemed neither of them was following the money on the back of a bull.

AJ listened for his daughter’s cries, but the blood roared so loudly in his ears he wouldn’t have been able to hear a jet take off.

“Let me get the chief,” Danny said, his hand on AJ’s arm. Tight. AJ hadn’t lost an ounce of muscle since “retiring.” He used it to throw off his friend. Danny let go but stayed beside AJ, saying, “I heard them talking about calling Child Services.”

Every one of AJ’s straining muscles tightened until his back sent a shooting pain down into his still-aching hip. Even if he’d been able to speak, he wouldn’t have known what to say to such crap, except a lot of four-letter words, which he tried not to use anymore because of EllaJayne. Everything he did now was to protect her. He’d quit riding bulls and wrangling for the rodeo.

No one was taking his daughter. He’d rescued her once. He’d do it again. AJ moved past Danny to the doorway beyond the desk. Finally, he heard voices and—“EllaJayne,” he shouted, except he felt like he’d been gut-punched and only had enough air for the shout to be a strained whisper.

Danny moved past him in the narrow hallway, through an open archway on the left and said, “She belongs to my buddy. He’s one hell of a bull rider.”

AJ followed him into the room with a fridge and microwave. There she was. Baby Girl in the arms of a woman wearing scrubs, her hair in a no-nonsense golden-brown ponytail. The disapproving line of the woman’s mouth couldn’t mar its soft pink charm. He held out his arms for his daughter. EllaJayne lifted her head from the woman’s shoulder, tear tracks silvery bright on her rounded cheeks where strands of her McCreary raven-black hair lay in a sticky mess. His heart hurt. His baby girl had been crying...again. He sucked at this father stuff.

“She was wandering around on her own. She could have ended up getting hit by a car or kidnapped,” said the woman’s voice, firm and soft at the same time.

“My daughter,” AJ said as he continued to hold out his now shaking hands. The woman glared at him.

“Absolutely not,” she said, clutching the girl tighter to her.

He dropped his arms. “I was fixing a hose. She was asleep.”

“You should have been paying more attention,” whispered the woman as she patted the little girl’s back, soothing her into laying down her head. “I found her wandering and brought her to the police. I could probably report you for neglect. I’m a physician’s assistant and we’re obligated by law to—”

“Neglect?” AJ didn’t try to keep his voice down and Baby Girl’s head popped up. He moved closer to snatch EllaJayne away.

A large man stepped in front of him. Where had this guy come from? “Now, sir, I’m Chief Rudy and we need to have a talk before I can release your daughter to you.”



The man, just shy of AJ's six feet two inches with close-cropped, cop-style graying brown hair, took AJ by the shoulder with a big hand and steered him out of the break room and down the hall. He directed him into a cramped office. "Sit." The chief pointed to a chair across from a wooden desk that nearly filled the room, his steel-blue gaze clearly telling AJ he was taking the situation seriously. "Seems like you know our mayor, but I still want details and information so I can check your background." The man pushed a paper across the desk.

AJ felt a yawning chasm of fear and despair opening at his feet. The same one that had been showing up in his nightmares as he and his daughter worked their way across the country, and before that, when he'd learned he had a daughter in foster care. He'd hooked up with her mother during a stint in Kentucky when he'd been drinking more than he should. When he'd first seen EllaJayne... He couldn't think about that now. The police chief wasn't fooling around, no matter this town wasn't much more than a wide place in the road. Then there was the woman, who didn't look old enough to be such a...stick in the mud. Why hadn't she just found him and chewed him out instead of going to the authorities? He focused again on the paper asking for his vital details. He filled it out quickly and handed it to the uniformed chief.

"Stay here while I run this."

AJ stood and paced in what space there was in the room. What the hell would he do if they didn't give him back his daughter? He didn't have money for an attorney. Nothing like this had been covered on any of the parenting sites he'd been reading every night. Other parents didn't lose their kids.

He'd had to fix the truck and she'd been sleeping after screaming at the top of her tiny lungs on their trip into Angel Crossing. He'd only stopped here to pay his respects at Gene's memorial, then they'd head to California, where an old rodeo buddy had promised him work and regular hours. He wasn't going back to Kentucky no matter what.

When he'd found out about EllaJayne less than three months ago, he'd vowed he'd be a better father than any of the long line of McCreary men had been. He'd ditched life on the road and promised himself no women who would come into and out of the little girl's life. She'd already had more knocks than any child deserved.

"Mr. McCreary," the police chief said. "Your record looks clean, other than two drunk and disorderlies. Mayor Leigh said those were 'misunderstandings.'"

AJ relaxed by a millimeter. "I'll take my daughter and be on my way."

"Before you do that, I'd like you to talk with Miss Pepper. I know a little one can be tough to keep track of—you're not the first daddy I've had in here. But...Miss Pepper's heart and her worries are in the right place. Plus, being a medical professional, she's got to be extra careful about these kinds of situations."

AJ stayed silent, following the chief back to the break room. The Pepper woman was seated at a table, holding his daughter. EllaJayne didn't even turn to him when he said her name. That hurt.

"The little darling's daddy checks out. He's here to take her back." The officer hovered just behind AJ.

"Did you hear that? Daddy's here," Pepper said, turning her head, pinning AJ with a glare of condemnation from her autumn-brown eyes.

"Baby Girl," he said, walking to the woman, holding out his hands for his daughter. Contrary as any McCreary, she pulled away and buried her face in the stranger's shoulder.

\* \* \*

PEPPER BOURNE HELD tight to the little girl. No matter what this tall man with his worn jeans and boots said now, he couldn't be much of a father if he hadn't even known his child had wandered off. She'd seen plenty of cowboys like him over the years, especially friends of Daddy Gene's. Just thinking that name still hurt. She snuggled the toddler closer.

"Hand her over," said Chief Rudy. "Kids wander off. It's happened to every parent."

"Are you sure? Her diaper was dirty."

“That happens to all kids, too,” the cowboy said swiftly. “I was right there. Under the hood.”

“And that worked so well, didn’t it? She didn’t even have a hat or shoes. What are you doing in town?” Not that it was really her business.

“Come to pay my respects to Gene Daniels. Got word he’d passed, and there was a memorial.”

Pepper squeezed the little girl who squeaked in protest. Daddy Gene had been gone for a month. Tears filled her eyes and she couldn’t choke out the words. A tiny hand patted her cheek. Pepper feared she would burst into ugly sobs.

“How did you know him?” she asked to distract herself.

“Barely kissin’ cousins and the rodeo,” the man answered. “Now, if I can have my daughter, I’ll be going.”

“Chief, I don’t know that I’m comfortable with the situation.” She stared hard at the toddler’s daddy, while ignoring the muscled strength and length of him. “Where’s your wife? Your daughter’s mother.”

“None of that’s your business, lady. The police chief here says I’m good to go,” he snapped back, his storm-cloud-gray eyes locked on hers.

“That may be but as a health care professional, I have a duty to ensure that any child is not being abused or neglected.” She made sure her tone let this cowboy know that he wasn’t fit to care for a chicken, let alone a precious little human being.

“Mama,” the toddler whimpered and rubbed her forehead into the crook of Pepper’s neck.

“Chief, you’ve got to let me examine her. Who knows how long she was in the sun?”

“Fine. Come on, Mr. McCreary, let’s get this settled,” Rudy said.

Pepper hesitated for a second. McCreary. That last name struck a chord. She needed to focus on the little girl. Her daddy didn’t look like a bad guy. He had dark hair like his daughter’s, though his had an unruly curl around his nape and ears. But the little girl hadn’t gotten her mink-brown eyes from him. He didn’t look or act like an abuser. An outlaw, maybe, a bad-boy rodeo cowboy. Still, it was her duty to make sure the toddler was being cared for properly. She had to give the girl a good once-over.

Followed by the chief and the cowboy holding his daughter’s stuffed animal, Pepper carried EllaJayne on her hip, coming out of the building that housed the town hall, the police station, a real estate office, and a law office. The clinic was half a block down on the right, across from the Angel Crossing Emporium of Wonders. The sign, with its painted roadrunner and mountain lion, always made her smile, even though the emporium had closed long ago. The mayor was trying to get a grant to hire artists to paint the plywood and “refresh” the sign to make the town look less abandoned.

The facades along the main road, which was picturesquely called Miners Gulch, had been added in the 1970s to entice tourists to the town, as the nearby mine and the county’s biggest employer started to close its operations. Tourists hadn’t been lured in, but the townsfolk had come to love the signs that gave the vibe of a Spaghetti Western set. Or a bona fide ghost town. The problem was a ghost town was a dead town. With no good jobs, Angel Crossing was edging toward that as the younger residents scattered to the wind. Pepper was the exception, rather than the rule. Although technically, she wasn’t local, not having moved to town until she was seven.

Today wasn’t the day to worry about Angel Crossing. She had a little darling in her arms who needed her attention. Like the old-timey facades, her clinic had the feeling of a bygone era. It served residents well enough, even if it housed more than one piece of equipment that should have been in a museum. She did what she could for her patients, many of them retired and living on minuscule pensions and Social Security. She regularly had to beg, borrow and nearly steal supplies, especially free samples. She knew of more than one patient who skimped on medications to pay for food. That’s why the garden would make such a difference.

“Oggie,” EllaJayne said into Pepper’s ear, reaching out with her hand and flexing her fingers. Pepper followed her gesture and saw the girl’s cowboy daddy, still holding onto the flattened stuffed animal she’d given him. The man had a hitch in his step that didn’t keep her from noticing his rodeo

swagger. He needed a hat. What cowboy didn't have a hat? It would have shaded his handsome face. Pepper knew trouble and she didn't need anyone to tell her this guy was that plus more. She also didn't need anyone to tell her that his kind of trouble could give a woman memories to warm up her nights.

Pepper focused on the bundle in her arms as she walked into Angel Crossing Medical Clinic. "I'm going to Exam One," she said to Claudette, her right-hand woman at the reception desk.

"Who is this?" asked Claudette, her short dark hair streaked with highlights and spiked to fit her warrior-woman attitude in a grandmother's body.

"We'll give you everything as soon as I'm done with the exam." The ring of boot heels followed Pepper. An uneven sound. She glanced back and caught the man grimacing. No time to worry about that.

"Okay, little darling, let's just see how your 'daddy' was caring for you." She ignored the snort from the cowboy.

She put him and everything else out of her mind, concentrating on the girl and the exam. She didn't want to miss anything. But other than the dirty diaper—which Pepper changed from her own supplies—and a little diaper rash, the toddler was fine.

"So?" he asked when she finished with the final tug of the girl's T-shirt.

"What about her vaccinations?"

"I... I... Of course she's had them. I have papers in the truck."

He didn't know. "Allergies?"

He stood feet planted and long fingers tapping against his leg. "It's all in her records. She's fine. You just said so."

She'd been working with patients ever since she'd started as an EMT in her teens, and read annoyance in the tightness of his mouth. She also saw fear in the tilt of his head. What to do? The child looked fine.

"You're good to go, then, but little ones are quicker than their parents think and can easily get into things they shouldn't. Let's go see if Claudette can't find cream for the rash." Pepper scooped up the girl and walked out. The exam room as they'd stood there had suddenly gotten smaller. She'd started to think trouble might be what she needed in her life. Because trouble had started to look a lot like a good time, which she hadn't had since...forever. Then smart Pepper reminded not-so-smart Pepper he was a patient's father...and a cowboy. The kind of man she'd long ago figured out wasn't for her. They might look pretty, but the shine wore off quickly.

She kept her gaze on Claudette and glanced at Chief Rudy, who had an odd look on his face as he stared down at his phone.

"What?" she asked because it was obvious that something had just popped up on the screen.

"I ran his name, but, well, I didn't connect it... Hell—"

This was bad. The chief didn't swear. It was a contest in town to see who could make him curse when they got pulled over or visited the station. The man just didn't get provoked, and if he did, he didn't say bad words. So that meant whatever he'd just discovered was horrible.

"His name is Arthur John McCreary."

"Everybody calls me AJ," the cowboy said irritably.

"You're Daddy Gene's cousin." The words popped out of her mouth in shock as the connection fell into place.

"Yeah, Gene is...was my cousin. I told you that." His voice had thickened with true emotion.

"Welcome to Angel Crossing," Rudy said. "Sorry the circumstances aren't better. Gene was a good man and a good friend."

"Thanks," AJ said and added, "I should have known. How many Peppers could there be in Angel Crossing?" He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "Gene talked about you and your mama. Please accept my condolences."

She nodded. Now she remembered him. He rode bulls and had dragged Daddy Gene from the ring when the animals had nearly stomped him to death. The one or two pictures she'd seen of AJ, his black hat had nearly covered his face.

"I guess I should take you to the ranch. Faye would never forgive me if I didn't bring you out to say hello. Daddy Gene hoped you'd come for a visit one day, but I don't think this is how he imagined it."

### Chapter Two

Pepper's directions to Gene's ranch had included exact mileages, road names and landmarks. Even in the sameness of the rocky terrain, dotted with gray-green bushes and low trees, he'd easily found the turnoff that wound through a short downhill drive. Flatlands opened up for a distance before moving into another set of foothills that rolled into mountains. The ranch included a low house, outbuildings and corrals. The animals milling around ranged in color from white to shadows-at-noon black. But they weren't cattle or horses or even goats.

He checked his rearview mirror to see his daughter, who was eerily quiet. Her head swiveled back and forth as she looked out the windows, staring wide-eyed, her lost-all-its-stuffing dog clutched tight in her fist.

Contrary as any McCreary, after days on the road wishing she'd quiet down, he wanted noise from his daughter now so he could stop thinking about Pepper. She somehow made scrubs look as good as painted-on jeans and a tight cowgirl shirt. She actually looked better than the buckle bunnies who'd been the honey to his bee for years. EllaJayne's mama had been Miss Kentucky Rodeo two years before he'd met her.

He stopped the truck in front of the house that had a lumpy outline of clearly unplanned additions. It had been Gene's home. He'd talked of the ranch with a lot of pride. Gene had retired from the rodeo circuit after a string of bad wrecks. Both Danny and AJ had tried to talk him out of it because he was the best at reading the animals. They'd been young and hadn't understood what it meant to have a body that had been battered and broken again and again.

AJ knew he couldn't stall any longer. Though he hated to intrude, his nearly maxed-out credit card and flat wallet told him otherwise. He had to swallow that pride and ask—beg for—their hospitality. He'd stay for the memorial, then move on. He'd come west for a brand-new start where no one had heard of the McCrearys of Pinetown, Kentucky.

He held EllaJayne firmly in his arms when he knocked on the weathered door. Up close, the ranch house looked like a cross between a trailer and a cabin.

"There you are," said the woman who opened the door. "Come in." Obviously, this was Faye, just as Gene had described her: "Stevie Nicks who bought her duds at Sheplers and her jewelry at swap meets." She stepped back, pushing a drape of gray-streaked hair with strips of color like her daughter's out of her watchful green eyes.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, finally remembering the manners that had been knocked into him with a spatula and fly swatter.

"Oh, my," she said as tears filled her eyes. "Don't you have the look of Gene? It's just like he's here. And those nice manners."

"Yes, ma'am." He and Gene looked nothing alike.

"And who is the gorgeous baby? Yours. Look at that hair, that skin. Oh, my, but she'll be a beauty. Come here, sweetheart," Faye said and held her hands out to his daughter. The little girl went right to her. "I bet I have a cookie you'd like. You can call me Grana. I always wanted someone to call me that. I'm in the Crone phase of my womanhood. The most powerful. You are in the Baby phase, still finding your power. But don't worry. It's there."

He followed her closely in the wake of the deep scent of incense and sharp desert herbs. "Ma'am," he tried, "I'm here to—"

"Have you eaten? No. I can see you haven't. Sit."

“Thank you, ma’am. I know that I should have called as soon as Gene...passed. But I’m here to pay my respects and attend the memorial.”

She waved a thin, elegant hand covered in silver and turquoise. “Gene understood. He spoke of you often. Now, I’ll fix you a plate and give this little one a cookie.”

“Ma’am,” AJ interrupted. “I don’t want to put you out at a time like this.”

“A time like what?”

Jeez. Gene had told him that his wife and he...well, actually not his legally wed wife. They had never married. AJ said gently, “A sad time like this.”

“Sad?” She laughed brightly and his daughter joined in. “We’re celebrating Gene’s life. That can never be sad.” Faye walked through a listing doorway into a kitchen filled with brightly painted cabinets and mismatched appliances.

“Now,” she went on, “you’re a Taurus and you’ve been traveling, so I think you need scrambled tofu, with sprouted bread, yogurt...no, not yogurt...kefir. Then I’ll move in with Pepper so you can have my room.”

“Please, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Of course, you’ll stay here. It’s what Gene would have wanted.”

“I couldn’t do that,” he protested politely, even though he’d planned to ask for such hospitality.

“I couldn’t let Gene’s family stay anywhere else.” Tears filled her voice and she squeezed EllaJayne closer to her.

AJ couldn’t afford to protest too strongly. “If you insist, ma’am.”

“Perfect. This food will balance you, and then you’ll have a wonderful night’s sleep. Here. Hold your daughter while I finish.” She plopped the little girl into his arms and magically produced a chunky cookie that EllaJayne immediately started gnawing.

“What’s in there?” he asked. This cookie looked like it might have all kinds of things that were bad for babies. Except what were those things? Chocolate? No, that was dogs. What had the website said?

Faye crossed to the stove. “Wheat germ, oats... You ride bulls, Gene said, and you’re a Taurus. Isn’t it wonderful the way the universe makes things like that work?”

“Used to ride bulls.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think the universe will like that.” She turned to him and a frown marred her surprisingly smooth brow.

“I don’t think the universe is very happy with me right now.” EllaJayne looked up at him, the cookie in one hand.

“No,” she said clearly. The one word she said regularly and loudly. Her brow wrinkled. Uh-oh. He knew that look. That was the look that meant something smelly was going to come out of one end or the other. Really, Universe, what have I ever done to you?

\* \* \*

PEPPER EXPECTED TO see Daddy Gene come around the side of the house and onto the patio, to greet everyone with a big shout and a laugh, then smooth his handlebar mustache into place before announcing that it was time to get the party started. Except that wouldn’t be happening. Faye had tried to make it festive with lights strung around the patio and a table laden with food. Of course, everyone knew the kinds of dishes Faye cooked so a number of pies, casseroles and platters had magically appeared, too.

Pepper saw the mayor chatting with Gene’s cousin AJ. The man and his daughter had stayed with them last night at Faye’s insistence. Pepper had been so busy between work and getting everything set for the memorial that she’d only been home to sleep. Pepper turned away, not sure exactly what she was feeling. Today was a celebration, she reminded herself, but the weight of responsibility made her shoulders ache. Daddy Gene had been a part of her life since he’d shown up



at the commune. Pepper had only been five years old, but she'd known he was the kind of man they both could count on. Now what?

"It's time," Faye announced. "We're here to celebrate the life of my lover, companion and soul mate." Then she started singing "Witchy Woman" while the silence got increasingly uncomfortable.

Dear Lord. Angel Crossing had more or less accepted Faye...they'd loved Daddy Gene and he and Faye were a package deal. Alone, Faye might be just a little too filled with hippie hokum.

Danny stepped up to Faye and stopped her swaying, off-key rendition mercifully short. "That was one of Gene's favorites. You know, he was my mentor... AJ and I wouldn't have stayed on any bull without Gene. He could read those animals like most men read the want ads." Nods rippled through the crowd. Faye smiled at Danny. It might just work out okay. "I'll miss Gene, just like all of us will. But I know he wanted us to have a good time tonight. Drink a little beer—his favorite, Lone Star—jaw a bit and eat good food...and I see the tables are filled. To Gene." Danny lifted his beer bottle and everyone joined in.

Pepper turned away to pull herself together. A celebration, she told herself again. She could do this for Daddy Gene. This one last thing for him. The man who'd been her father and the one person she could count on no matter what. "Love you, Daddy Gene," she said quietly, looking out toward the mountains dark against the brilliant pinks, purples and reds of the sunset. "Thanks for the show." She smiled and then wiped away the tears. Time to honor a life well lived. She wouldn't remember those last days of illness and pain. She'd remember him laughing. That was her favorite Daddy Gene.

\* \* \*

"FAYE ASKED ME to do the reading of the will tonight."

Pepper stared at Bobby Ames, Angel Crossing's attorney and part-time taxidermist.

He went on, "Everyone grab a seat. This won't take long."

They were in the living room of the ranch house, sitting on an assortment of chairs salvaged from roadside garbage piles or built by Faye's friends.

"Come along, Pepper Moonbeam," Faye said, formal and stiff. She'd been holding back her sadness tonight so they could "rejoice in" Daddy Gene's life, not mourn his death. Pepper knew how tough that was as she'd worked over and over to hold her own tears in check. He'd been gone for just a month. They'd scattered his ashes weeks ago, but today was the real goodbye and much more painful than the one at his bedside. She didn't understand what the lawyer was doing. Gene had left the ranch to Faye, what else could the will say? My god, he'd named the place for her: Santa Faye Ranch.

Pepper sat and waited for the attorney to speak again, a moment out of a soap opera or a telenovela. Bobby Ames finally started to read the will. Daddy Gene named a couple of friends and gave them his riding gear and two of his trophies. Then Bobby Ames did the strangest thing. He put the will down, sucked in a breath and spoke in a voice that Pepper was sure he'd learned from Law and Order. "I want to let you know that if Gene had come to me... I'll just read this, then you can ask questions."

What had Daddy Gene done? Put the rest of the will in verse? Or maybe he'd set up a scavenger hunt for the remaining items, like his bear-claw necklace. That would be like him. He'd been just a big kid at heart.

"The ranch goes to my cousin and savior, Arthur John McCreary."

Pepper's breath clogged her lungs as she ran over the words again in her head. They didn't make any sense.

"He left me the ranch?" AJ asked. He didn't sound like a man who'd just hit the jackpot.

"You've got the wrong will," Pepper told the attorney. Well, maybe more like accused him of gross incompetence.

"Now..." Chief Rudy started.

"It's wrong," she said. It's got to be. She'd used the inheritance she'd been sure she and her mother would get on the grant application to get the Angel Crossing Community Garden Project started. "Daddy Gene always said... I used the property—"

"How could I have forgotten," Faye said with something like regret and worry, two emotions she rarely acknowledged. "You told that agency you would use the value of the ranch as the matching money."

"You did what?" AJ's storm-gray gaze locked on her. No chance that she couldn't figure out what he was thinking. "There's a lien on the property?"

"Not exactly," she said.

He hitched up his sleeping daughter so her head fit more firmly on his shoulder. "You. Me. The attorney. We need to talk now."

"What are you, a caveman? I already told you there's some mistake." She moved closer to whisper what needed to be said so no one—especially not her mother—could hear. "You didn't even visit. When he was...when the doctors said that he...you didn't visit. Why would he leave this to you? Did you call him? Talk to the attorney?"

"Are you saying that I scammed Gene? My God, he was kin. He watched out for me when I first started riding bulls."

"What other reason could there be?"

Bobby Ames pretended to clear his throat.

Pepper moved around the room restlessly as the silence stretched. Not only was her plan on the line, her mother's future was, too. The ranch would have been plenty to keep Faye in yogurt and tofu. One good thing about her mother was that she didn't need a lot of cash to get along. That's why Pepper had been so sure the community garden plan would work.

"Now, we need to discuss this frankly," Bobby Ames said, still using his TV-attorney voice. "There'll be no more talk about this will not being legal. It is. Faye and the chief looked everywhere for another one. There was nothing at the house. I called around to other attorneys and there was nothing. This is his will."

Pepper wanted to say no. She wanted to scream no, but she was nothing if not a realist. She left the dreaming to her mother.

"Why me?" AJ asked.

Yeah, she wanted to know that, too.

Bobby Ames adjusted his glasses. "Could be that it's an old will and you were his cousin? Or maybe because you saved his life."

"I'm not sure I saved him," AJ said, moving his daughter to his other shoulder.

"The way Gene told it was that if you hadn't run into the arena and grabbed him, he'd have been stomped to death. He said the clowns had gotten tangled up with a loose calf and you were the first one to him. He said you took a good kick to the ribs." AJ's hand went to his side. "I believe you nearly lost your spleen."

"He thanked me plenty," AJ said. "I never expected—"

"You don't need to make any decisions today," Bobby Ames said, "except this thing with Pepper and the grant. What did Faye mean?"

Pepper searched for a way to understand the new lay of the land. She'd never imagined Daddy Gene wouldn't leave the ranch to Faye. She'd never asked him about it in those last weeks. They'd all known he was dying but they'd still tried to deny it until the very end.

No one spoke and the silence stretched out long enough that she could hear the deep breathing of the baby. Come clean, girlie girl, Daddy Gene's voice said in her head. Dear Lord. What would they do? What would the state office where she'd filed her paperwork say?

Pepper said, "Daddy Gene loved Faye, you all know that. You know what he would do." Her voice squeaked to a stop. Her chest hurt from holding back the tears. She had to get through this

next bit, then she could fall to pieces. She needed to protect Faye's future and her own plans for the garden, her patients and the town. Pepper breathed deeply as she'd seen her mother do before a big announcement. "I'm planning the Angel Crossing Community Garden here at the ranch and we needed a grant for the equipment. Faye agreed I could use the value of the ranch's land and outbuildings to match the money the state would grant us. It was the only way to get the money, so I put that on my application. I've already set up the greenhouse using my own savings and promised loans to my farmers. I told you all about it, chief. Remember? There would be fresh food for those who worked the ground and plots where others could grow specialty plants that they'd then sell and pay me land rent. It would be run by a nonprofit and support small businesses as well as senior and children's health. The mayor even agreed it was a good idea."

"It is a good idea," Chief Rudy said, cutting off AJ when he started to protest, "but you didn't tell any of us that you basically were promising money you don't have or that the plan had been put together with a spit and a prayer."

Finally, AJ spoke, his voice low but no less angry. "So you've used my ranch and now there's a lien and I won't be able to sell."

"It seems that you've gone awfully quick from 'I can't believe this is mine' to ordering us all around because you inherited some land," Pepper said, facing him and forcing her voice to be steady. "There isn't a lien on the property. I've only just put in the paperwork. I'm sure I can explain things and rescind the application...if I have to, which I'm not convinced I'll have to."

"It's the Spring Equinox right now," Faye said out of nowhere, as she sometimes did. "This was always Gene's favorite time of year. He said spring was when anything was possible."

### Chapter Three

Butch, the Australian shepherd, sat happily in the front seat of Pepper's small SUV. The one her mother had insisted Daddy Gene buy and then paint an eye-searing purple. On the plus side, Pepper was easily recognizable. It meant when she went to homes up in the mountains, her patients immediately recognized her. Faye may have known what she was doing. Maybe. Pepper pushed away the panic and flexed her hands on the steering wheel. "Butch, we're in a lot of trouble, and I don't mean because you sat in Dr. Cortez's chair. I used a ranch I didn't own to try and get money from the government. It's not like they gave me any money or that I lied. I really, really thought the ranch was ours. It was just two weeks after Daddy Gene died. I might not have been at my best, but there was a deadline." The black, brown and white dog with mismatched eyes turned and gave her one of his smiles. Butch had been picked out of a litter of wriggling puppies to herd Faye's Beauties—her alpacas and llamas. She'd talked Daddy Gene into getting the animals about a year ago, about the same time as the ranch that had rented most of Santa Faye Ranch had closed its gates and broken its lease. Faye insisted the fleece from the animals, which she planned to spin and weave, would make up for the lost revenue. Not long after the animals arrived, Daddy Gene had gotten very sick again. Faye had been more worried about him than about making her spinning and weaving venture profitable, even though she loved her Beauties. Butch, who acted like a poodle in a hairy shepherd body, had worked hard with her to earn his good citizen certificate and therapy training. He visited the office on the days it was just her and Claudette. Dr. Cortez, who came to the clinic twice a week, didn't like Butch or believe any animal could help calm patients. Butch actually did a good job with people facing needles—kids and adults alike.

Only two minutes from the ranch, Pepper needed to come up with her talking points fast. She'd avoided AJ and Faye this morning. She had, however, called an attorney—not Bobby Ames—for advice that wasn't free. He'd said she might have a case for overturning the will, and he didn't think she'd end up in jail, probably, for using the ranch to try to get the grant. He'd advised withdrawing the application immediately, but not explaining why unless she was forced to. The goal was to not look like a liar and a cheat to the agency. Pepper understood what he wasn't saying. If she ever wanted

Angel Crossing or herself to get another grant from the state or anyone else, she had to clear up this problem quickly and quietly. She'd already started and so far so good.

Pepper parked next to AJ's king-cab pickup, dusty and dented. "Come on, Butch," she said unnecessarily. The dog was already at the front door waiting for her. She gripped her tote tighter and went in.

Butch raced from her side, yipping with excitement. He disappeared into the kitchen. Pepper took papers to review later that night out of her tote, then hung the bag on its hook. She toed off her clogs and slipped her feet into sandals. A place for everything and everything in its place. One of those sayings from kindergarten that had more than a little ring of truth.

Butch ran back to her, his doggy smile stretching across his face. No more stalling, Pepper. Butch sprinted ahead of her again. She strained to hear voices.

"Faye, I'm home." That was stupid. Of course she was home. Silence.

Butch trotted into the kitchen and then looked over his shoulder at her. That was his open-the-back-door look. That must be where they were. Pepper sniffed the air. Someone had been cooking. She almost felt sorry for AJ because she knew that smell. Faye had made scrambled tofu, which was okay, but she'd added kimchi, fish sauce and...dear Lord. She smelled the cheese Faye insisted on making—the kind that tasted like dirty socks. Maybe Faye's cooking would convince AJ to move along, except no one would walk away from a ranch.

Butch sat on her foot and leaned against her leg. He really was a remarkable therapy dog. He always knew when anyone was in distress. She patted his warm furry head before making herself a little taller than her five feet seven so she could more easily face the people on the patio. Specifically, the tall, lean AJ.

Faye in Earth Mother mode held EllaJayne as she danced her around the patio. Pepper didn't see AJ, though.

"Faye, where's that child's father? Did you kill him with the kimchi?" Faye's Korean-style sauerkraut had peppers hot enough to singe nose hairs. Pepper didn't eat the kimchi or anything else with peppers—hot or sweet. One of life's little ironies.

"EllaJayne and I are enjoying the rebirth of the world since it's spring. Aren't we? You're an old soul, aren't you, little one?"

"Faye," Pepper said with patience.

"You're thirsty. I can hear it in your voice. Go get a drink." Her mother danced another three steps. "This will all work out for the best."

"Good to know."

"No need for sarcasm, that's the work of a small soul."

"Sorry. It's just that today has been—"

"I know, dear," Faye said, taking the little girl's arm and waving. "There's your daddy."

AJ was a cowboy, from his hip-rolling walk to his well-used boots and frayed-at-the-seams jeans. Pepper couldn't read what he might be thinking. She could guess, though. Don't borrow from the bank of trouble, she heard Daddy Gene's voice in her ear. She wanted to snap back at him that she wouldn't need to borrow if he'd just left the ranch to Faye. But he wasn't here. She needed to leave that go.

"You and I need to talk," AJ said in a soft drawling voice that didn't have a hint of friendly.

"Absolutely," Pepper said. Acting confident—even when she wasn't—convinced people that she knew what she was doing. "We can talk in my office."

"No, darling," Faye said. "You should take advantage of the energy of spring and the outdoors." Her mother took the child and walked inside.

"I made some calls," AJ said.

"Okay." She would let him talk so she could figure out what he knew and wanted. She watched him pace around the patio. He definitely was handsome—she had to be honest.

“I spoke with Danny Leigh.”

Did he think being the mayor’s friend was a big deal? Like she should be impressed? Everybody knew the mayor. This was a small town.

“Telling a state agency you owned land you didn’t could end up getting you and the town—including Danny and others who signed the papers—into a lot of trouble.”

“Daddy Gene meant for Faye to have the ranch. Everyone in town knew that was his plan.” She plowed on, pushing back the tears. “Faye agreed with me about the garden because it would provide food and a chance to earn extra money for anyone who needs help in Angel Crossing. How can you take that from them?”

“This is about what’s legal and fair.”

“Fair? I’ll tell you what’s fair. Giving my patients a fighting chance to get healthy with fresh fruits and vegetables. Helping kids understand where what’s on their plate comes from and what real food is. What about the entrepreneurs? Liddy already has her name in for a loan to make soaps and salves from the herbs she’ll grow. With that money, she can go to the community college, get a degree and earn enough so she can rent a bigger place and be allowed to have her kids back.”

“It’s the law. The will is clear. The ranch goes to me.” He turned his back to her and his shoulders—his wide and muscled shoulders—lifted with a deep breath. “I have plans, too, and they all have to do with giving my little girl the best. Bobby Ames said that it will take months to settle the estate and that’s if there are no challenges or issues.” He turned and glared at her. “I was going to go to California but it seems that we have a place here. Plus, I need to make sure you don’t do anything else with the property that will make it less attractive to a buyer.”

She whispered, because that was all the air she had, “You’re selling the ranch?”

\* \* \*

LOOKING AT PEPPER’S horrified face nearly made him take back the truth.

“I can fix this so you don’t have to sell. Or—” Her voice trailed off as her shoulders drooped.

He couldn’t weaken now. Not only did his future ride on this ranch but his daughter’s did, too. For the first time in his life, he had something to lose. “Promises won’t put food in me and my daughter’s bellies.” Good Lord, he heard his daddy in those hard words. He couldn’t stop now even if he really believed that he could make this work out for all of them...somehow. “And what will keep me out of trouble if the state doesn’t like that you lied on the grant, huh?”

Her gaze dropped. “I’ve already started withdrawing the application. You don’t need to worry.”

Good thing for him she’d given in. He’d had about another ten seconds of meanness before he’d have caved. “My original plan had been to stop to pay my respects before heading to California to work on a dude ranch for a buddy of mine. Since the estate might not be settled for months—and it looks like there are a few things to take care of in preparation for a sale and to make sure you don’t try anything else with the property—that means EllaJayne and I will need to stay on here, in what’s technically my house...or will be. I mean, Bobby Ames explained that until everything is settled, you and Faye don’t have to let me stay. But hotels get mighty expensive, and there’s the attorney to pay, as well as food and diapers and such for EllaJayne. Faye already agreed and you wouldn’t put out a little girl. Also, I’ll have to look for work, which leads to my next problem. I need someone to look after EllaJayne, from time to time. She likes your mama and since you’re a nurse—”

“Physician’s assistant,” she corrected.

He’d better hurry because she was recovering her spit and vinegar. “Physician’s assistant. Danny Leigh vouched for you, too. You and your mama could do in a pinch, but I need to have something steadier, more permanent. So, here’s the deal. In addition to staying here, I need your help in tracking down someone to care for my daughter. You’ve got to know who’s good at that sort of thing. Does Angel Crossing have a day care? Either way. I want good care at a reasonable price.”

“I’m sure I can give you care recommendations. But I’m a little confused as to why I should be helping you? What do I get out of the deal?”



He worked to not admire her backbone. Up against a wall and she wasn't afraid to negotiate. "What's your counteroffer?"

"Since Faye said you can stay, then you should care for Faye's Beauties."

"Her Beauties?"

"The llamas and alpacas. Faye does most of the work but she needs help."

"Seems fair."

Her face had relaxed into a smile. He liked that smile. It shouldn't matter if he liked it or not. His only goal here was getting the ranch free and clear, selling it and moving on. He'd considered staying but he couldn't do that and raise a daughter. Plus he'd never even worked on a ranch. He'd helped with animals at the rodeo but that wasn't the same thing.

"I could write everything up in a contract," he went on, "but I'd like to think we could do this on a shake of the hand?" Despite her hippie mama and using a ranch she didn't own, Pepper was practical and trustworthy, he thought. He'd gotten that impression, anyway, from everything Danny and Bobby Ames had said to him.

Her stiff shoulders and etched-in-stone chin told him she wasn't giving up or giving in without a little more fight. She might have been down, but she wasn't out. "Since you already settled the housing with Faye, I don't see that I can take issue with that. I'm sure I can find your daughter care. She's a sweet baby. I need some assurance you won't sell out from under me and I want a chance to buy Santa Faye Ranch before it goes on the market."

"If that's legal, sure, why not." He didn't care who bought the property. He just needed the money. "When everything's settled and I'm ready to sell, I'll let you know."

"Wow. So kind of you to tell me when you plan to sell my home."

He almost laughed at her snarky comment. He might appreciate her backbone and the way she filled out her scrubs... Jeez...what was his problem? "Promise." Her gaze stayed on him. He couldn't look away. "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye." Now, what had made him say something that juvenile and stupid?

She laughed. "You know, Daddy Gene said that same thing." Suddenly, she stopped smiling.

Her face settled into lines of pain, her eyes darkening. He knew that pain. He was feeling it, too. Missing Gene. The man who'd helped him become...a man, with his rough-and-tumble advice and affection. AJ reached out and dragged her into a hug, pulling her against him to stop the pain, for both of them. "I'm so sorry. I know how much Gene loved you and your mama."

She didn't move and he stared out over her head and into the expanse of scrubby desert and mountains around them. He'd never been in mountains with so little vegetation. In Kentucky, the only time a mountain looked this bad was after mining. Here it was the natural order of things. The lack of green wore on his eyes.

"I miss him. I miss him so much," Pepper said in a hoarse whisper.

AJ wasn't good at this sort of thing, never had been. But he couldn't walk away from her sadness and tears. "I know, honey," he said. He looked down at her, where she'd buried her face into his shoulder. Her hair was pulled back from a center part to a loose and messy bun at the back of her head. It had streaks of golden red in the light brown. The lush fullness surprised him. She appeared so tightly wound except for the softness of her hair, and her brightly colored toenails. No way should he be spending so much time determining the exact color of her hair or noticing that she had daisies painted on her toenails. He relaxed his hold a little, needing some space between them. She clutched at him.

"Not yet," she whispered as a breath shuddered from her.

He brushed his cheek against her temple and he nearly kissed her, wanting to soothe her distress and let her know she wasn't alone. Instead, he held her loosely against him. He could guess what her curves would feel like and what they might do to him if he pulled her closer. He wasn't that much of a dog.

Her scent of spice and citrus filled his head, such a sweet fresh smell. It reminded him of the time between spring and summer, full of promise.

“Did Daddy Gene really talk about us when he was still riding bulls?” she asked, not moving her face from his shoulder.

“Sure.” This topic was much safer than where his mind had gone when his hand encountered the sexy deep curve of her waist. He’d just stopped himself from testing the swell of her hip. He kept his eye on a large cactus in the near distance. “He said that Faye loved turquoise and pepitas. Pumpkin seeds.” Pepper nodded so he went on. “He said you refused to let him get you another horse when yours died from colic.” Crap. Why had he brought up that story? He could feel the sadness course through her as she burrowed into his shoulder again, like she could hide there forever. Surprisingly, he would have let her if it would have helped.

“Toni,” she said, her voice muffled. “Her name was Antonia. I didn’t think I’d ever not be sad again. For a while, I wanted to be a vet, but then when Daddy Gene got sick the first time, I realized medicine—human medicine—was for me.” She relaxed against him.

He wrapped his arms more fully around her, wanting to...he wasn’t sure what, other than make her feel better, to lessen the sadness he felt in her every muscle and heard in her voice. She hadn’t asked for this any more than he had. They both needed to weather the situation as best they could. He could guess at her sorrow now. It was an echo of his own. He missed Gene. He’d been someone AJ knew he could count on if anything went wrong. He hadn’t kept in close touch during the years after Gene left the rodeo, but he’d known his cousin would be there if he needed him. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here earlier, before Gene passed, but...there was EllaJayne and her mama.”

Pepper stiffened and not from sorrow. Crap. His smooth tongue had deserted him. He usually wasn’t so clueless with women.

She pulled away and turned her head but he saw her wipe at her eyes. “I’m good now,” she said with taut determination. “What do we do? Shake hands?”

#### Chapter Four

Pepper thrust out her hand and stepped away from AJ’s heat. Shake hands and move on. That was what she needed to do. Forget she’d broken down in his arms and had liked—way too much—the warm strength of him. He took her hand in his and lingered for a second. She didn’t change her grip, making her gaze stay on him. How had she not seen the tiny white scar that stretched up from the corner of his upper lip and another on the outside of his dark brow? His face told her what she needed to know. A rodeo cowboy. They didn’t stick around.

“Okay?” he asked with soft gruffness.

She shifted her eyes to a place over his shoulder where she could see the mountains that surrounded Angel Crossing. “I’ll get you sitters’ names.” She could do this. She had to do this for herself, for Faye and for Angel Crossing. They were all counting on her.

As for the other part of this debacle, that he and EllaJayne remain at the ranch? That would be all right, too. No matter there would be months and months of sharing a bathroom, a kitchen. It would be very intimate. No. Cramped. And she’d already gotten a good view of a fit-for-bull-riding cowboy walking around in a towel.

Faye danced onto the patio, bouncing EllaJayne on her hip. “We’re going to breathe in the colors.”

“Grana,” the toddler agreed as they danced off.

Pepper gritted her teeth and glanced at AJ to gauge his reaction. Until she was a teen, Pepper had stayed at the ranch, with Faye homeschooling her. Then she’d gone to public school, where a cowboy wearing anything but Wranglers was cause for comment, and her mother’s unusual view of the world after years of living in a commune had mortified Pepper. Now, some days she could appreciate how growing up with Faye had taught her compassion and patience. Angel Crossing needed both. The residents were stubborn about changing anything, even things that would make them healthier.

“All done,” Faye said, snuggling her nose against the toddler’s. “The blue sky smelled like Aqua Velva and the white clouds made us both think sheets dried outside.” The little girl giggled.

“I’ll take her now,” AJ said, holding his arms out for his daughter.

“Wait,” Pepper said. Suddenly, the whole day felt too huge, like something had shifted in the world. Dear Lord, she was starting to sound like Faye. She dug deep for the calm and unemotional Pepper who took over during emergencies. “I want to make sure that we’re clear on our responsibilities.” AJ nodded. She went through the list, while she kept a professional eye on him. She needed to use her PA Spidey Senses. She could ferret out a lie at twenty paces—at least that’s what she told patients. She just wanted to be certain that he would stick by the agreement.

She looked at him hard. It didn’t take a medical degree to interpret his bloodshot eyes or the dark circles underneath. He was exhausted. Why hadn’t she noticed that before? She wanted to tell AJ to go get some sleep and she’d take care of everything. But he wasn’t her responsibility. She didn’t have to care for him. She needed her attorney to straighten out the will. Where you goin’ to find the dinero for that? Daddy Gene’s voice rang in her head. She’d find it because everyone she cared about—which didn’t include AJ and his daughter—was counting on her.

\* \* \*

PEPPER QUIETLY CLOSED the door to the bedroom she now shared with her mother. AJ and his little girl had been given Faye’s room. Faye hadn’t minded—she hadn’t been spending much time there since Daddy Gene had died. Pepper could only imagine how long tomorrow would feel because last night she hadn’t gotten much more than an hour of sleep. Good thing Tuesday was a Dr. Cortez day. It meant her patient load was reasonable.

Pepper headed to the kitchen, not needing to turn on any lights because Faye, as always, had left the house well-lit. Her mother, despite her love of the moon and staying up late, did not like the dark.

Having grown up in a commune, more or less, before Daddy Gene had showed up, Pepper had a high tolerance for sharing space. But sharing the house with AJ made it feel really, really small. Like right now, she could’ve sworn she smelled his scent of dusty leather, baby powder and...bubble gum? That last was new. It smelled like the flavoring in children’s medicine. She moved a little faster. Was EllaJayne sick?

AJ stood in the kitchen shirtless, the top button of his jeans undone so she could see the band of his tighly-whities. Stop looking, she told herself firmly as she stood in the shadows. She made her gaze move to his hand and the small white bottle he held.

“Is EllaJayne okay?”

“What?” He jerked around, the bottle dropping from his hand, pink syrup spraying everywhere. “Damn it.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you,” she mumbled as the syrup dripped down his chest. His well-muscled chest. She had to stop noticing things like that right now. She rushed to the sink for a dishcloth and the cleaning supplies underneath.

“This stuff is sticky. What are you doing awake?” he whispered. She glanced over her shoulder to see him rubbing at the pink drops.

“Here,” she said, taking the cloth and wiping at his chest, using her best professional voice and touch. She concentrated on the pink syrup that had caught in the light furring of hair on his chest and the arrow...she looked back up. His pupils had enlarged so that his storm-gray eyes looked black. “Umm...maybe you can do that while I clean up the floor.” His hand covered hers. She didn’t feel threatened. Instead she felt his warmth and strength, and that was dangerous. Much more than dangerous. That kind of heat could make her...had made her...do stupid things. His mouth softened and the ends curled just a little as his gaze moved over her. She scrutinized his well-defined jaw, hollowed cheeks and the strong column of his neck before focusing on the small white scar that looked doubly pale against his dark skin in the shadows made by the night lights in the kitchen. She wanted

to use the tip of her tongue to trace that little ridge of skin and then listen to his breathing catch and his skin pebble and shiver with excitement.

He cleared his throat and the spell of near darkness, his heat and her own addled brain startled her back to reality. She stepped back quickly, not even cringing when she felt the sticky syrup on her sole.

“If you need a refill for EllaJayne, stop by the clinic tomorrow.” She turned slowly, refusing to run from the kitchen, even though that’s what she should do. “I think you can clean up the rest of the spill.”

“It’s been years since anyone bathed me, but I think I might like it.”

She swung around. He was a macho, jerk bull rider. They were the worst of the worst, Daddy Gene had told her, and he should know since he’d been one of them for a while. Crazy enough to climb on the back of three-quarters of a ton of testosterone-pumped muscle again and again. She needed to remember that about AJ. He was not the man who awkwardly tried to care for his daughter, making her heart go “aww” and her hands itch to smooth the daughter and father’s similarly frowning faces.

“Good night,” she finally said when he wouldn’t stop looking at her.

“You know, your mother told me that she’d seen my arrival—something to do with your sign and a chart.”

Pepper pulled in a breath and let it out slowly through her nose. Why couldn’t her mother say normal motherly things, like stay away from my daughter, you no-good rodeo bum? Because that sort of comment had been Daddy Gene’s job and he wasn’t here. “Faye also believes that a bit of bacon and the water drawn from a well on the new moon cures ingrown toenails.” She walked away from him, like a woman who knew where she was going, not one running away from herself.

\* \* \*

AJ STARED AT the unfamiliar ceiling, wishing he were in an anonymous hotel room in an anonymous town. His daughter’s cranky whimpers would soon be a full-throated I’m-up-and-I-want-attention yell. From his short time as a dad, he’d learned he had another forty-five seconds of peace. He’d take those measly seconds to remind himself he’d climbed on bulls bent on killing him. Dealing with the constant worry and anxiety Baby Girl’d brought into his world was a cake walk, with a huge wobbly cake.

His daughter’s cry stopped his thoughts. He had the morning routine down: diaper, T-shirt, socks and then into the car seat so he could use the bathroom without her wandering off. Not that it had worked so well when he’d been fixing the truck. Maybe bungee cords would hold her in the seat? Even he knew that was a bad idea.

He got both of them cleaned up without running into any of the women. Not surprising since EllaJayne liked to wake before the sun. On the bright side, she’d allow him twenty minutes of uninterrupted peace for his first cup of coffee while she sat in his lap sipping her morning milk. It was a part of the day that he could feel almost competent at this fathering thing.

He took both of them out onto the patio to enjoy the cool breeze with EllaJayne wrapped in a little sparkly pony sweatshirt in eye-searing green. He enjoyed the first dark hit of his coffee and Baby Girl’s warm head against his shoulder as he watched the pink rays of sun warm the horizon. For those suspended-in-time moments, all was right in the world.

“Oh, you’re out here,” Pepper said accusingly.

AJ jerked, spilling coffee on himself with a few drops landing on EllaJayne’s thick sweatshirt. The little girl squalled. “Shit,” he said as he checked her for burns. The hot liquid had splashed across her sweatshirt, which meant he needed to change her. For a toddler who had bad aim with a spoon, Baby Girl was particular about her clothing.

“Did you burn her?”

“No thanks to you,” he shot back as he stood with his daughter, who had pitched her sippy cup to the ground where it popped open and spilled. His own jeans were stained with coffee, too, and he knew he’d have a nice red welt. “I’ll clean up out here after I change EllaJayne...again.”

Pepper opened her mouth to say something then closed it. Her gaze moving from his face downward, skimming quickly over his crotch. “Umm...you okay?” she asked grudgingly.

“Are you going to examine me?” he asked. Her head snapped up and their eyes met. The heat that had filled the space between them last night was back, searing and unexpected. His daughter’s head thumped his chest as she wiped her tear-streaked face against his once-clean shirt. Back to reality. “Next time warn me.”

He made a strategic retreat. Inside, her dog gave him a cocked-head stare that said: Don’t mess with her, buddy.

After he’d redressed himself and his daughter, he returned to the kitchen to make breakfast. He needed to talk to Danny about where to find work. He’d turned down Pepper’s half-hearted offer to help him look. His guess was that she hoped if he didn’t have a job, he’d move along.

AJ heard the shower running and worked really, really hard to not imagine Pepper in there, naked, wet and soapy. Dear Lord, what was his problem? He heard Baby Girl in her high chair starting to wind up for another good cry. Just as he turned to deal with her, Faye entered the kitchen with a vague smile on her face.

“I dreamed good things for you, Arthur John.”

“AJ,” he corrected as he pulled out the last container of yogurt for his daughter. His coffee would have to be enough until he could find a grocery store. All the food from the memorial had been eaten over the weekend or was in the freezer. He didn’t recognize anything in the fridge. He’d learned already to be very, very wary when Faye offered him a meal.

“I have goat yogurt. Much better than store-bought,” she said.

“We’re good,” AJ said as he offered a spoon of the pink goop. His daughter quickly made her way through the yogurt.

“Neither of you were burned. Good,” Pepper said as she walked into the kitchen, giving him a professional once-over glance. Silence filled the room. Both Faye and EllaJayne remained quiet as he and Pepper stared at each other. He couldn’t turn his head. Her honey-brown hair lay on her shoulders in damp whirls. The scrubs, shapeless on anyone else, highlighted her curves and showed off the length of her thigh. His gaze landed on her toes, the nails with their cheery flowers and neon color.

He’d promised himself that he’d mend his cowboy ways now that he was a daddy. No more women, at least until he got the hang of being a father, which meant his next date would be around the time EllaJayne left for college.

“Do you want me to make you breakfast?” Faye asked Pepper. Finally, AJ could look away.

“I can’t be late today. Dr. Cortez is in.”

“Oh, my,” Faye said and turned to dig in the refrigerator. “Okay. I’ll make breakfast for Arthur John.”

He’d rather face Tornado the bull again. “I’m good, ma’am.”

He quickly got himself and EllaJayne into the truck. He’d stop somewhere for food, maybe take donuts for Danny as payment for his advice. In town, he drove by the Angel Crossing Medical Clinic. Why couldn’t he have met Pepper six months ago, before Baby Girl, before his life had gone from fun to grinding responsibility? Six months ago, he’d have taken her out for dancing and drinks and then back to his room. Well, maybe. If he was honest with himself, those anonymous hotel rooms and buckle bunnies had lost their allure. He’d just not figured out what else to do with himself. Now he had a new life, whether he wanted it or not. No use crying over spilled moonshine because he had EllaJayne to care for and was stuck at Santa Faye Ranch. Once he sold the property, he’d have the cash to make sure Baby Girl stayed with him permanently. Of course, until that happened he needed



to make money. He didn't care how, really, just so long as it put bills in his pocket and it was legal. Okay, cowboy, he told himself. Saddle up and get to work.

### Chapter Five

Pepper got into her purple SUV to look in on a patient before hitting the clinic. Many of her patients had a standoffish attitude toward her, but she didn't let that stop her from trying to win them over. It was better than when she'd started at the clinic three years ago. From the beginning Daddy Gene had been embraced by Angel Crossing, maybe because he'd leased parts of the property to local ranchers or because he'd been known on the rodeo circuit. She and Faye had never quite fit in, starting with Faye homeschooling her, then sending her to high school with lunches filled with tofu and homemade wheat bread. Between being an EMT after high school and now treating the town, the attitude had been changing. More slowly than she'd like, of course.

After checking her patient, she had plenty of time to get to the clinic, which meant plenty of time to mull over her situation. She figured what she had to work on next was finding day care for AJ's daughter. Could Faye watch the little girl? Probably, except her mother's idea of child rearing and AJ's didn't seem to be in the same universe. Could Pepper watch EllaJayne? Exactly how would she explain that to the doctor who came to the clinic two times a week? It wouldn't come to that. She'd find him a list of women to choose from.

A caregiver by nature, she knew she'd have to make sure she didn't allow herself to get drawn into AJ and his daughter's troubles. And there was trouble there. A cowboy like him didn't set off across country on his own with a toddler if there wasn't some sad story. She'd become a PA to help people. It was why she'd put up the ranch for the grant to start the community garden in the first place.

Even after withdrawing her application, in another three weeks, she'd have her first crop from the greenhouse and cold boxes. She already had plans on how to get the word out and who would get the first veggies. So many of her patients should be on assistance but were too proud. With fresh veggies and eventually fruit, everyone would win. She wanted chickens for eggs, too. First the garden...no, first was getting the ranch into her hands. Daddy Gene had meant for it to go to her and her mother. He'd told them that. His time had just been shorter than they'd all wished and he'd never changed his will. She had to believe he wouldn't have been upset that she was going to fight AJ for the ranch.

Could she just threaten to go to court? Her attorney seemed like a go-getter. AJ, with his drawl and cowboy swagger, wouldn't know what hit him.

"Knock, knock," a woman's voice said as the door opened. "I know you're not officially open but..."

"Not a problem. Come in, Lavonda."

"I wouldn't be here for myself, but I live with a big stubborn Scot who is about to die from coughing. I think you saw him, didn't you?"

"Yes. And I told him if the cough didn't clear up to come in."

"Silly you." Lavonda Leigh Kincaid laughed. "I would think that you've dealt with enough cowboys to know the routine."

Lavonda was Mayor Danny Leigh's sister, and newly wed to Professor of Archeology Jones Kincaid. She'd also taken over a company that provided guided tours of the Arizona desert. She'd been friendly with Pepper, explaining that women under the age of sixty in this town needed to bond together since there were so few of them.

"The routine being that unless he can't lift his head from where it hit the ground after he fell down, he's fine?"

"Something like that. Really, if you could just give me something strong enough to knock him out, he'd get better. He just needs to sleep for a couple of days."

"Let me write a prescription for cough syrup. It's not fancy but it'll work and better yet, it should make him drowsy. Keep him from driving, operating machinery, and so on while he's taking this."

“Bless you.” Lavonda watched Pepper write up the prescription. “How are you doing?”

“I didn’t catch whatever the professor has.”

“That’s not what I meant. The memorial. The relative who inherited the ranch.”

Pepper reminded herself that she really did love Angel Crossing even if the gossip mill would give the NSA a run for its money. “It’s been tough. But having the service... I don’t know. It...it gets better every day.”

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