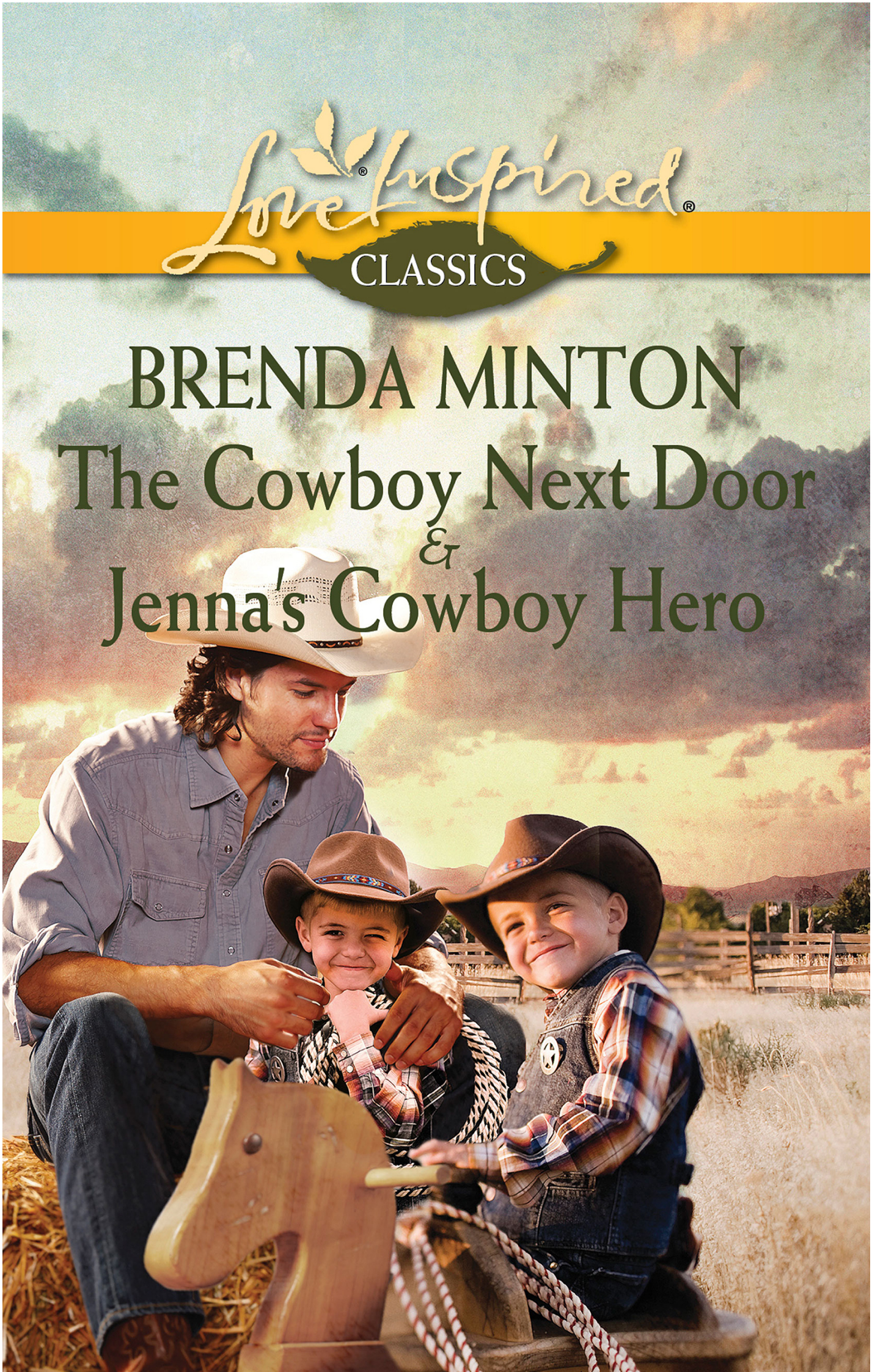
Love Inspired®
CLASSICS

BRENDA MINTON

The Cowboy Next Door
&
Jenna's Cowboy Hero



Mills & Boon M&B

Brenda Minton

The Cowboy Next Door & Jenna's Cowboy Hero

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The Cowboy Next Door & Jenna's Cowboy Hero / B. Minton — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

Two beloved novels of family, love and cowboys by bestselling author Brenda MintonThe Cowboy Next Door Jay Blackhorse is determined not to be won over by city girl Lacey Gould and her niece. Still, they clearly need his help. Lacey's clueless about caring for the infant her sister abandoned. Jay has a talent for stopping the baby's tears. But when a dark secret from Lacey's past blows into town, will Jay's help be enough?Jenna's Cowboy Hero Former football player Adam Mackenzie hopes to fix up a camp for underprivileged kids. But the city slicker doesn't know horse tack from a touchdown. The pretty rancher next door seems to be the answer to his prayers. Army vet Jenna wants only to raise her twin boys and run her ranch–not fall in love. But can the gorgeous and kind Adam make her open her heart to love?

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Содержание

MILLS & BOON 6
The Cowboy Next Door 7
Chapter One 8
Chapter Two 14
Chapter Three 21
Chapter Four 26
Chapter Five 32
Chapter Six 37
Chapter Seven 42
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 48

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Praise for Brenda Minton and her novels

"Minton's characters are well crafted."

—*RT Book Reviews*

"This wonderful romance has good characters and a great story."

—*RT Book Reviews* on *The Cowboy Next Door*

"[A] heartwarming story."

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Jenna's Cowboy Hero*

"This easy, sensitive story…is quite touching. Don't miss [it]."

—*RT Book Reviews* on *His Little Cowgirl*

"A lovely story of faith, trust and taking one day at a time."

—*RT Book Reviews* on *A Cowboy's Heart*

Brenda Minton lives in the Ozarks with her husband, children, cats, dogs and strays. She is a pastor's wife, Sunday-school teacher, coffee addict and sleep deprived. Not in that order. Her dream to be an author for Harlequin started somewhere in the pages of a romance novel about a young American woman stranded in a Spanish castle. Her dreams came true, and twenty-something books later, she is an author hoping to inspire young girls to dream.

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The Cowboy Next Door & Jenna's Cowboy Hero

Brenda Minton

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CONTENTS

THE COWBOY NEXT DOOR

JENNA’S COWBOY HERO

The Cowboy Next Door

Brenda Minton

Truly my soul silently waits for God;
From Him comes my salvation.
—*Psalms* 62:1



This book is dedicated to my mom,
Rosetta (Kasiah) Cousins
(May 1937–November 1980).

She taught me to dream and she encouraged me to use my imagination. She put up with baby birds and mice in the house, numerous wild kittens, possums, ponies, goats and puppies. And to my dad, Don Cousins, who is still excited by every accomplishment. You taught me the value of hard work, even when I didn't appreciate it. I love you. And to the memory of Patsy Grayson, encourager, friend, blessing.

Chapter One



"Lacey, when are you going to go out with me?" Bobby Fynn hollered from across the dining room of the Hash-It-Out Diner.

"Maybe next week," Lacey called back as she refilled an empty coffee cup, smiling at her customer, an older woman with curly black hair and a sweet smile.

"Come on, Lacey, you can't keep turning me down."

Lacey smiled and shook her head, because Bobby wasn't serious, and she wasn't interested.

"Ignore him," Marci, the hostess, whispered as Lacey walked past.

Lacey shot her friend a smile. "He doesn't bother me. I'll be back in a minute. I need to get a pitcher of water."

She hurried to the waitress station, set the glass coffeepot on the warming tray, and grabbed the pitcher of ice water. The cowbell over the door clanged, announcing the arrival of another customer. She hustled around the corner, pretending her feet weren't blistered and her back wasn't aching from the double shifts she'd worked for the last week.

If it wasn't for the perfect piece of land she wanted to buy…

Two strong hands grabbed her arms, stopping her mid-stride and preventing a near collision. The pitcher of ice water she'd carried out of the waitress station sloshed, soaking her shirt. She looked up, muttering about clumsiness and met the dark gaze of Officer Jay Blackhorse.

Gorgeous, he was definitely gorgeous. Tall with black hair and brown eyes. All cowboy. All rugged and sure of himself. But not her type. He'd been back in Gibson, Missouri, for a month now, and she already had him figured out. He was too serious, not the kind of customer who chatted with a waitress, and she was fine with the knowledge that they weren't going to be best friends.

Several men called out, offering him a chair at their table, as Lacey moved out of his grasp. Not only was he the law, his family also raised cattle and horses. He hadn't lived in Gibson for the last seven or eight years, but he still fit in on so many levels that Lacey didn't know how he could do it all.

She was still trying to find something other than round holes for her square-peg self.

She was the girl from St. Louis who had showed up six years ago with a broken-down car, one hundred dollars and the dream of finding a new life.

Jay waved at the men who called out to him, but he didn't take them up on their offers to sit. Instead, he took hold of Lacey's arm and moved her toward the door.

"Lacey, I need to talk to you outside."

"Sure." Of course, not a problem.

She set the pitcher of ice water on a table and followed him to the door, trying hard not to remember her other life, the life that had included more than one trip in the back of a police car.

It would have been a waste of breath to tell Jay she wasn't that person any more. He didn't know her.

He didn't know what it had been like to grow up in her home, with a family that had fallen apart before she could walk. Jay had a mom who baked cookies and played the piano at church. Lacey's mom had brought home boyfriends for herself and her daughters.

Instead of protesting, Lacey shot Jay a disgusted look—as if it didn't matter—and exited the diner at his side. When they were both outside, she turned on him, pushing down her pain and reaching for the old Lacey, the one who knew how to handle these situations.

"What's this all about, Blackhorse? Is it 'humiliate the waitress day' and someone nominated me to get the prize?"

He shook his head and pointed to his car. "Sorry, Lacey, but I didn't know what else to do with her."

"Her?"

The back door of the patrol car opened.

Lacey watched the young woman step out with a tiny baby in her arms and a *so what* look on her face. Jay's strong hand gripped Lacey's arm, holding her tight as she drew in a deep breath and tried to focus. She pulled her arm free because she wasn't about to fall.

Or fall apart.

Even at twenty-two Corry still looked drugged-out, antsy and on the verge of running. Her dark eyes were still narrowed in anger—as if the world had done her wrong. The thrust of her chin told everyone she would do what she wanted, no matter whom it hurt.

Jay stood next to Lacey, his voice low. "She said she hitched a ride to Gibson and that she's your sister."

Lacey wanted to say that it wasn't true and that she didn't have a sister. She wanted to deny she knew the young woman with the dirty black hair and a baby in her arms.

The baby cried and Lacey made eye contact with Corry.

"She's my sister," Lacey said, avoiding Jay's gaze.

"Thanks for claiming me." Corry smacked her gum, the baby held loosely against her shoulder, little arms flailing. The loose strap of Corry's tank top slid down her shoulder, and her shorts were frayed.

Lacey sighed.

"I don't have to leave her here." Jay pulled sunglasses from his pocket and slid them on, covering melted-chocolate eyes. The uniform changed him from the cowboy that sat with the guys during lunch to someone in authority.

Lacey nodded because he did have to leave Corry. What else could he do? What was Lacey going to do? Deny her sister? The Samaritan had cared for the man on the side of the road, a man he didn't know. And Lacey *knew* Corry.

"She can stay. I'm off duty in thirty minutes."

"Do you have to make it sound like the worst thing in the world?" Corry handed Lacey the baby and turned to pick up the backpack that Jay had pulled from the trunk of his car.

Lacey looked at the infant. The baby, Corry's baby, was dressed in pink and without a single hair on her head. She was beautiful.

"Her name's Rachel." Corry tossed the information like it didn't matter. "I heard that in a Bible story at the mission we've been living in. We couldn't stay there, though. We need a real home."

A real home? The one-room apartment that Lacey rented from the owners of the Hash-It-Out was hardly a home fit for three.

She inhaled a deep breath of air that smelled like the grill inside the diner, and the lunch special of fried chicken. Corry and a baby. Family meant something. Lacey had learned that in Gibson, not in the home she grew up in. Now was the time to put it into practice. She could tell her sister to leave, or she could be the person who gave Corry a chance.

Like the people of Gibson had done for her.

But what if Corry ruined everything? Lacey tucked that fear away, all the while ignoring the imposing Officer Blackhorse in his blue-and-gray uniform, gun hanging at his side.

"You know, you two could help me," Corry tossed over her shoulder as she dug around in the back seat of the patrol car. "I haven't eaten since this morning. And then I get here and you aren't even glad to see me."

Continuous jabber. Lacey tuned it out, nodding in what she hoped were the appropriate places. She held Corry's baby close and took the car seat that Jay had pulled out of his car. His gaze caught and held hers for a moment, and his lips turned in a hesitant smile that shifted the smooth planes of his face. Jay with his perfect life and his perfect family.

She didn't want to think about what he thought when he looked at her and her sister.

"Need anything?" Jay took a step back, but he didn't turn away.

She shrugged off the old feelings of inadequacy and turned to face her sister. Corry shifted from foot to foot, hugging herself tight with arms that were too thin and scarred from track marks —evidence of her drug use.

"Lacey?" Jay hadn't moved away and she didn't know what to say.

* * *

Lacey Gould's dark, lined eyes were luminous with unshed tears. Jay hadn't expected that reaction from the waitress who always had a comeback. He held a grudging admiration for her because she never slowed down.

And he knew her secrets, just as he knew that her sister had prior arrests. Corry Gould had two drug convictions and one charge of prostitution. She was a repeat offender. A simple run through the state system was all it took to find out if a person had a criminal record. In Lacey's case, the Gibson police chief had filled him in. Jay hadn't been sure if it had been gossip or serious concern for his parents. They had spent a lot of time with Lacey Gould in his absence.

His parents hadn't appreciated his concern, though. They knew all about Lacey's arrest record, and they knew who she was now. That was good enough for them.

He'd been a cop for too long to let it be good enough for him.

Lacey shifted next to him, the baby fussing.

She was slight in build, but not thin. Her brown eyes often flashed with humor and she had a mouth that smiled as much as it talked. He tried to ignore the dark hair, cut in a chunky style and highlighted with streaks of red.

For the moment her energy and feistiness were gone. He couldn't leave her like that.

"Lacey, I can take her to the station," Jay offered, knowing she wouldn't accept. She scraped leftovers from plates at the diner to feed stray cats; he doubted she would turn away her sister and that baby.

Corry moved closer to Lacey. The younger sister had the baby now, holding the infant in one arm and the dingy backpack in the other. Her eyes, blue, rather than Lacey's dark brown, shimmered with tears.

Lacey was motionless and silent, staring at her sister and the baby.

"I have to take the baby somewhere, Lace. The guy who dropped me off at the city limits was going south, way south. I don't have a way back to St. Louis."

"I'm not going to turn my back on you, Corry. But as long as you're here, you have to stay clean and stay out of trouble."

"If it helps, I checked her bag and she doesn't have anything on her." Jay could tell when Lacey bit down on her bottom lip and studied her sister that this information didn't really help.

He shrugged because he didn't know what else to do. The two sisters were eyeing one another, the baby was fussing and his radio squawked a call. He stepped away from the two women and answered the county dispatcher.

"Sorry, I have to run, but if you need anything—" he handed Lacey a card with his cell phone number "—I'm just a phone call away."

"Thanks, Jay. We'll be fine." She took the card and shoved it into her pocket without looking at him.

"That's fine, but just in case." He shifted his attention to her sister. He had a strong feeling that Corry wasn't really here looking for a place to start over.

As he got into his patrol car and looked back, he saw Lacey standing on the sidewalk looking a little lost. He'd never seen that look on her face before, like she wasn't sure of her next move.

He brushed off the desire to go back. He knew he couldn't help her. Lacey was a force unto herself, independent and determined. He was pretty sure she didn't need him, and more than positive he didn't want to get involved.

* * *

Lacey watched Jay Blackhorse drive away before turning to face Corry again. The front door of the diner opened and Lacey's boss, Jolynn, stepped outside.

"Honey, if you need to take off early, go ahead. We can handle it for thirty minutes without you." Jolynn smiled at Corry.

Lacey wished she could do the same. She wished that seeing her sister here didn't make her feel as if her life in Gibson was in danger.

"I can stay." Lacey picked up the backpack that Corry had tossed on the ground.

"No, honey, I insist. Go home." Jolynn patted her arm. "Take your sister on up to your place and get her settled."

Lacey closed her eyes and counted to ten. She could do this. "Okay, thank you. I'll grab my purse. But if you need…"

"We don't need. You're here too much as it is. It won't hurt you to go home a few minutes early."

Lacey stepped back inside the cool, air-conditioned diner with Jolynn, and pretended people weren't staring, that they weren't whispering and looking out the window at her sister.

She pretended it didn't bother her. But it did. It bothered her to suddenly become the outsider again, after working so hard to gain acceptance. It bothered her that Jay Blackhorse never looked at her as though she belonged.

Jolynn gave her a light hug when she walked her to the door. "You're a survivor, Lacey, and you'll make it through this. God didn't make a mistake, bringing that young woman to you."

Lacey nodded, but she couldn't speak. Jolynn smiled and opened the door for her. Lacey walked out into the hot July day. Corry had taken a seat on the bench and she stood up.

"Ready?" Lacey picked up her sister's bag.

"Where's your car?"

"I walk to work."

"We have to walk?"

Lacey took off, letting Corry follow along behind her. Her sister mumbled and the baby whimpered in the infant seat. Lacey glanced back, the backpack and diaper bag slung over her shoulder, at her sister who carried the infant seat with the baby.

As they walked up the long driveway to the carriage-house apartment Lacey had lived in for over six years, Corry mumbled a little louder.

Lacey opened the door to her apartment and motioned her sister inside. The one room with a separate bathroom and a walk-in closet was less than five hundred square feet. Corry looked around, clearly not impressed.

"You've been living in a closet." Corry smirked. "And I thought you were living on Walton's Mountain."

Ignore it. Let it go. Push the old Lacey aside. "I think you should feed the baby."

"Ya think? So now you're a baby expert."

The old Lacey really wanted to speak up and say something mean. The new Lacey smiled. "I'm not an expert."

Corry had done nothing but growl since they'd left the diner. Obviously she needed a fix. And she wasn't going to get one.

"Is there another room?"

"No, there isn't. We'll make do here until I can get something else." Lacey looked around the studio apartment that had been her home since she'd arrived in Gibson.

The home she would have to give up if Corry stayed in Gibson. Starting over again didn't feel good. The baby whimpered. A six-week-old child, dependent on the adults in her life to make good choices for her.

Starting over for a baby. Lacey could do that. She would somehow make it work. She would do her best to help Corry, because that meant the baby had a chance.

Corry tossed her backpack into a corner of the room and dumped the baby, crying and working her fist in her mouth, onto the hide-a-bed that Lacey hadn't put up that morning.

Lacey lifted the baby to her shoulder and rubbed the tiny back until she quieted. Corry had walked to the small kitchen area and was rummaging through the cabinets.

"You know, Corry, since you're here, wanting a place to live, maybe you should try being nice."

"I am being nice." Corry turned from the cabinets and flashed a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "And your boyfriend is cute."

"He isn't my boyfriend." Lacey walked across the room, the baby snuggling against her shoulder. She couldn't let her sister bait her. She couldn't let her mind go in that direction, with Jay Blackhorse as the hero that saved the day. "Corry, if you're going to be here, there are a few rules."

"Rules? I'm not fourteen anymore."

"No, you're not fourteen, but this is my house and my life that you've invaded."

Lacey closed her eyes and tucked the head of the baby against her chin, soft and safe. Be fair, she told herself. "I'm sorry, Corry, I know you need a place for the baby."

"I need a place for myself, too."

"I know that, and I'm willing to help. But I have to know that you're going to stay clean. You can't play your games in Gibson."

Corry turned, her elfin chin tilted and her eyes flashing anger. "You think you're so good, don't you, Lacey? You came to a small town where you pretend to be someone you're not, and suddenly you're too good for your family. You're afraid that I'm going to embarrass you."

"I'm not too good for my family. And it isn't about being embarrassed." It was about protecting herself, and the people she cared about.

It was about not being hurt or used again. And it was about keeping her life in order. She had left chaos behind when she left St. Louis.

"You haven't been home in three years." Corry shot the accusation at her, eyes narrowed.

No, Lacey hadn't been home. That accusation didn't hurt as much as the one about her pretending to be someone she wasn't.

Maybe because she hoped if she pretended long enough, she would actually become the person she'd always believed she could be. She wouldn't be the girl in the back of a patrol car, lights flashing and life crumbling. She wouldn't be the young woman at the back of a large church, wondering why she couldn't be loved without it hurting.

She wouldn't be invisible.

Lacey shifted the fussing baby to one side and grabbed the backpack and searched for something to feed an infant. She found one bottle and a half-empty can of powdered formula.

"Feed your daughter, Corry."

"Admit you're no better than me." Corry took the bottle and the formula, but she didn't turn away.

"I'm not better than you." Lacey swayed with the baby held against her. She wasn't better than Corry, because just a few short years ago, she had been Corry.

But for the grace of God…

Her life had changed. She walked to the window and looked out at the quiet street lined with older homes centered on big, tree-shaded lawns. A quiet street with little traffic and neighbors that cared.

"Here's her bottle." Corry shoved the bottle at Lacey. "And since the bed is already out, I'm taking a nap."

Lacey nodded, and then she realized what had just happened. Corry was already working her. Lacey slid the bottle into the mouth of the hungry infant and moved between her sister and the bed.

"No, you're not going to sleep. That's rule number one if you're going to stay. You're not going to sleep while I work, take care of the baby and feed you. I have to move to make this possible, so you're going to have to help me out a little. I'll have to find a place, and then we'll have to pack."

Corry was already shaking her head. "I didn't say you have to move, so I'm not packing a thing."

Twenty-some years of battling and losing.

"You're going to feed Rachel." Lacey held the baby out to her reluctant sister.

Corry took the baby, but her gaze shifted to the bed, the blankets pulled up to cover the pillows. For a moment Lacey almost caved. She nearly told her sister she could sleep, because she could see in Corry's eyes that she probably hadn't slept in a long time.

"Fine." Corry sat down in the overstuffed chair that Jolynn had given Lacey when she'd moved into the carriage-house apartment behind the main house.

"I need to run down to the grocery store." Lacey grabbed her purse. "When I get back, I'll cook dinner. You can do the dishes."

"They have a grocery store in this town?" Corry's question drew Lacey out of thoughts that had turned toward how she'd miss this place, her first home in Gibson.

"Yes, they have a store. Do you need something?"

"Cig…"

"No, you won't smoke in my house or around Rachel."

"Fine. Get me some chocolate."

Lacey stopped at the door. "I'm going to get formula and diapers for the baby. I'll think about the chocolate."

As she walked out the door, Lacey took a deep breath. She couldn't do this. She stopped next to her car and tried to think of what she couldn't do. The list was long. She couldn't deal with her sister, or moving, or starting over again.

But she couldn't mistreat Corry.

If she was going to have faith, and if she was ever going to show Corry that God had changed her life, then she had to be the person she claimed to be. She had to do more than talk about being a Christian.

She shoved her keys back into her purse and walked down the driveway. A memory flashed into her mind, ruining what should have been a relaxing walk. Jay's face, looking at her and her sister as if the two were the same person.

Chapter Two



Jay finished his last report, on the accident he'd worked after leaving Lacey's sister at the diner. He signed his name and walked into his boss's office. Chief Johnson looked it over and slid it into the tray on his desk.

"Do you think the sister is going to cause problems?" Chief Johnson pulled off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Of course she will."

"Why? Because she has a record? She could be like Lacey, really looking for a place to start over."

"I don't know that much about Lacey. But I'm pretty sure about her sister."

"Okay, then. Make sure you patrol past Lacey's place a few times every shift. I'll let the other guys know." The Chief put his glasses back on. "I guess you've got more work to do when you get home?"

"It's Wednesday and Dad schedules his surgeries for today. I've got to get home and feed."

"Tomorrow's your day off. I'll see you Friday."

"Friday." Jay nodded and walked out, fishing his keys out of his pocket as he walked.

He had to stop by the feed store on his way home, for the fly spray they'd ordered for him. At least he didn't have to worry about dinner.

His mom always cooked dinner for him on Wednesdays. She liked having him home again, especially with his brother and sister so far away. His sister lived in Georgia with her husband and new baby. His brother was in the navy.

It should have been an easy day to walk off the job, but it wasn't. As he climbed into his truck he was still remembering the look on Lacey's face when she watched her sister get out of the back of his car.

He knew what it was like to have everything change in just a moment. Life happened that way. A person could feel like they have it all under control, everything planned, and then suddenly, a complete change of plans.

A year ago he really had thought that by now he'd be married and living in his new home with a wife and maybe a baby of his own on the way.

Instead he was back in Gibson and Cindy was on her way to California. She'd been smarter than him; she'd realized three years of dating didn't equal love. And he was still living in the past, in love with a memory.

As he passed the store, he saw his mom's car parked at an angle, between the lines and a little too far back into the street. He smiled, because that was his mom. She lived her life inside the lines, but couldn't drive or park between them.

Other than the parking problem, they were a lot alike.

He drove to the end of the block, then decided to go back. She typically wasn't in town this time of day. Something must have gone wrong with dinner. He smiled because something usually did go wrong.

He parked in front of the store and reached for the truck-door handle. He could see his mom inside; she was talking to Lacey Gould. He let go of the door handle and sat back to wait.

He sat in the truck for five minutes. His mom finally approached the cash register at the single counter in the store. She paid, talked to the cashier for a minute and then walked out the door. Lacey was right behind her.

Talk about a day going south in a hurry.

"Jay, you remember Lacey." Wilma Blackhorse turned a little pink. "Of course you do, you saw her this afternoon."

"Mom, we've met before." He had lived in Springfield, not Canada. He'd just never really had a reason to talk to Lacey.

Until today.

"Of course you have." His mom handed him her groceries and then leaned into the truck, resting her arms on the open window. "Well, I just rented her your grandparents' old house. And since you have tomorrow off, I told her you would help them move."

"That really isn't necessary." Lacey, dark hair framing her face and brown eyes seeking his, moved a little closer to his truck. "I can move myself."

"Of course you can't. What are you going to do, put everything in the back of your car?" Wilma shook her head and then looked at Jay again.

Lacey started to protest, and Jay had a few protests of his own. He didn't need trouble living just down the road from them. His mom had no idea what kind of person Corry Gould was.

Not that it would have stopped her.

He reached for another protest, one that didn't cast stones.

"Mom, we're fixing that house up for Chad." Jay's brother. And one summer, a long time ago, it had been Jamie's dream home. For one summer.

It had been a lifetime ago, and yet he still held on to dreams of forever and promises whispered on a summer night. His mom had brought Jamie and her family to Gibson, and changed all of their lives forever.

"Oh, Jay, Chad won't be out of the navy for three years. If he even gets out of the navy. You know he wants to make it a career." She patted his arm. "And you're building a house, so you don't need it."

He opened his mouth with more objections, but his mom's eyes narrowed and she gave a short shake of her head. Jay smiled past her.

Lacey, street-smart and somehow shy. And he didn't want to like her. He didn't want to see vulnerability in her eyes.

"I'll be over at about nine in the morning." He didn't sigh. "I'll bring a stock trailer."

"I don't want you to have to spend your day moving me."

He started his truck. "It won't be a problem. See you in the morning."

"Don't forget dinner tonight," his mom reminded.

"You don't have to cook for me. I could pick something up at the diner."

"I have a roast in the Crock-Pot."

That was about the worst news he'd heard all day. He shot a look past her and Lacey smiled, her dark eyes twinkling a little.

"A roast." He nodded. "That sounds good. Lacey, maybe you all could join us for dinner."

"Oh, I can't. I have to get home and pack."

He tipped his hat at her and gave her props for a quick escape. She'd obviously had his mother's roast before.

"Thanks, Jay." Lacey Gould backed away, still watching him, as if she wanted something more from him. He didn't have more to give.

"See you at home, honey." His mom patted his arm.

"Mom…"

His mom hurried away, leaving him with the groceries and words of caution he had wanted to offer her. She must have known what he had to say. And she would have called him cynical and told him to give Lacey Gould and her sister a chance.

* * *

Lacey woke up early the next morning to soft gray light through the open window and the song of a meadowlark greeting the day. She rolled over on the air mattress she'd slept on and listened to unfamiliar sounds that blended with the familiar.

A rustle and then a soft cry. She sat up, brushing a hand through her hair and then rubbing sleep from her eyes. She waited a minute, blinking away the fuzzy feeling. The baby cried again.

"Corry, wake up." Lacey pushed herself up off the mattress and walked to the hide-a-bed. Corry's face was covered with the blanket and she slept curled fetus-style on her side.

"Come on, moving day."

Corry mumbled and pulled the pillow over her head.

Lacey stepped away from the bed and reached into the bassinet for the pacifier to quiet the baby. Rachel's eyes opened and she sucked hard on the binky. Lacey kissed the baby's soft little cheek and smiled.

"I'll get your bottle."

And then she'd finish packing. She side-stepped boxes as she walked to the kitchen. Nearly everything was packed. It hadn't taken long. Six years and she'd accumulated very little. She had books, a few pictures and some dust bunnies. She wouldn't take those with her.

Memories. She had plenty of memories. She'd found a picture of herself and Bailey at Bailey's wedding, and a note from Bailey's father's funeral last year.

She'd lived a real life in this apartment. In this apartment she had learned to pray. She had cooked dinner for friends. She had let go of love. She had learned to trust herself. Dating Lance had taught her lessons in trusting someone else. And when not to trust.

The baby was crying for real. Lacey filled the bottle and set it in a cup to run hot water over it. The bed squeaked. She turned and Corry was sitting up, looking sleepy and younger than her twenty-two years.

Life hadn't really been fair. Lacey reminded herself that her sister deserved a chance. Corry deserved for someone to believe in her.

Lacey remembered life in that bug-infested apartment that had been her last home in St. Louis. She closed her eyes and let the bad memories of her mother and nights cowering in a closet with Corry slide off, like they didn't matter.

She picked up the bottle and turned off the water. The dribble of formula she squeezed onto her wrist was warm. She took the bottle back to Corry and then lifted the baby out of the bassinet.

"Can you feed her while I finish packing?" Lacey kissed her niece and then lowered her into Corry's waiting arms.

Corry stared down at the infant, and then back at Lacey. "You make it look so easy."

"It isn't easy, Corry."

"I thought it would be. I thought I'd just feed her and she'd sleep, and stuff. I didn't want to give her away to someone I didn't know."

Lacey looked away from the baby and from more memories.

"I need to pack."

"I'm sorry, Lacey."

"Don't worry about it." Lacey grabbed clothes out of her dresser. "I'm going to take a shower while you feed her. You need to make sure you're up and around before Jay gets here."

When Lacey walked out of the bathroom, he was standing by the door, a cowboy in jeans, a T-shirt and a ball cap covering his dark hair. He nodded and moved away from the door. In the small

confines of her apartment she realized how tall he was, towering over her, making her feel smaller than her five-feet-five height.

"Oh, you're earlier than I expected."

"I thought it would be best if we got most of it done before it gets hot."

"I don't have a lot. It won't take long." She looked around and so did Jay. This was her life, all twenty-eight years packed into a studio apartment.

"We should be able to get it all in the stock trailer and the back of my truck."

"Do you want a cup of coffee first? I still have a few things to pack."

"No coffee for me. I'll start carrying boxes out."

Lacey pointed to the boxes that she'd packed the night before. And she let him go, because he was Jay Blackhorse and he wasn't going to sit and have a cup of coffee with her. And she was okay with that.

Her six-month relationship with Lance Carmichael had taught her a lot. He had taught her not to open her heart up, not to share. She would never forget that last night, their last date.

I can't handle this. It's too much reality. His words echoed in her mind, taunting her, making a joke of her dreams.

"Are there any breakables in the boxes?" Jay had crossed the room.

Lacey turned from pouring herself a cup of coffee. He stood in front of the boxes, tall and suntanned, graceful for his size. He was all country, right down to the worn boots and cracked leather belt.

He turned and she smiled, because he wore a tan-and-brown beaded necklace that didn't fit what she knew about Jay Blackhorse. Not that she knew much. Or would ever know much.

Funny, she wanted to know more. Maybe because he was city and country, Aeropostale and Wrangler. Maybe it was the wounded look in his eyes, brief flashes that she caught from time to time, before he shut it down and turned on that country-boy smile.

"I've marked the ones that are fragile," she answered, and then grabbed an empty box to pack the stuff in the kitchen that she hadn't gotten to the night before.

Jay picked up a box and walked out the front door, pushing it closed behind him. And Corry whistled. Lacey shot her sister a warning look and then turned to the cabinet of canned goods and boxes of cereal. She agreed with the whistle.

Two hours later Lacey followed behind Jay's truck and the stock trailer that contained her life. Corry had stayed behind. And that had been fine with Lacey. She didn't need her sister underfoot, and the baby would be better in an empty apartment than out in the sun while they unloaded furniture and boxes.

From visits with Jay's mom, Lacey had seen the farmhouse where Jay's grandparents had lived. But as she pulled up, it changed and it became her home. She swallowed a real lump in her throat as she parked next to the house and got out of her car.

The lawn was a little overgrown and the flower gardens were out of control, but roses climbed the posts at the corner of the porch and wisteria wound around a trellis at one side of the covered porch.

Her house.

Jay got out of his truck and joined her. "It isn't much."

"It's a house," she whispered, knowing he wouldn't understand. She could look down the road and see the large brick house he'd grown up in. It had five bedrooms and the living room walls were covered with pictures of the children and the new grandchild that Wilma Blackhorse didn't get to see enough of.

"Yes, it's a house." He kind of shrugged. He didn't get it.

"I've never lived in a house." She bit down on her bottom lip, because that was more than she'd wanted to share, more than she wanted him to know about her.

"I see." He looked down at her, his smile softer than before. "You grew up in St. Louis, right?"

"Yes."

"I guess moving to Gibson was a big change?"

"It was." She walked to the back of his truck. "I want to thank you for this place, Jay. I know that you don't want me here…"

He raised a hand and shook his head. "This isn't my decision. But I don't have anything against you being here."

She let it go, but she could have argued. Of course he minded her being there. She could see it in his eyes, the way he watched her. He didn't want her anywhere near his family farm.

* * *

Jay followed Lacey up the back steps of the house and into the big kitchen that his grandmother had spent so much time in. The room was pale green and the cabinets were white. His mom had painted it a few years ago to brighten it up.

But it still smelled like his grandmother, like cantaloupe and vine-ripened tomatoes. He almost expected her to be standing at the stove, taking out a fresh batch of cookies.

The memory brought a smile he hadn't expected. It had been a long time since his grandmother's image had been the one that he envisioned in this house. It took him by surprise, that it wasn't Jamie he thought of in this house, the way he'd thought of her for nine years. He put the box down and realized that Lacey was watching him.

"Good memories?" she asked, curiosity in brown eyes that narrowed to study his face.

"Yes, good memories. My grandmother was a great cook."

He didn't say, "unlike Mom."

"Oh, I see."

"I guess you probably do. My mom tries too hard to be creative. She always ends up adding the wrong seasoning, the wrong spices. You know she puts cinnamon and curry on her roast, right?"

Lacey nodded. She was opening cabinets and peeking in the pantry. She turned, her smile lighting her face and settling in her eyes. Over a house.

"I love your mom." Lacey opened the box she'd carried in. "I want to be like her someday."

She turned a little pink and he didn't say anything.

"I want to have a garden and can tomatoes in the fall," she explained, still pink, and it wasn't what he wanted to hear.

He didn't want to hear her dreams, or what she thought about life. He didn't want to get pulled into her world. He wanted to live his life here, in Gibson, and he didn't want it to be complicated.

Past to present, Lacey Gould was complicated.

And she thought he was perfect. He could see it in her eyes, the way she looked at him, at his home and his family. She had some crazy idea that if a person was a Blackhorse, they skipped through life without problems, or without making mistakes.

"It's a little late for a garden this year." He started to turn away, but the contents of the box she was unpacking pulled him back. "Dogs?"

"What?"

"You like dogs."

"I like to collect them." She took a porcelain shepherd out of the box and dusted it with her shirt.

"How many more do you have?" He glanced into the box.

"Dozens."

"Okay, I have to ask, why dogs?"

She looked up at him, her head cocked a little to the side and a veil of dark brown hair falling forward to cover one cheek.

"Dogs are cute." She smiled, and he knew that was all he'd get from her.

He didn't really want more.

* * *

Dogs are cute. As Jay walked through the front door of his house the next morning, he had a hard time believing that Lacey could be right about dogs. He looked down at his bloodhound and shook his head. Dogs weren't cute. Dogs chewed up a guy's favorite shoes. Dogs slobbered and chewed on the leg of a chair.

"You're a pain in my neck." He ignored the sad look on the dog's face. "You have no idea how much I liked those shoes. And Mom is going to kill you for what you did to that chair."

Pete whined and rested his head on his paws. Jay picked up the leather tennis shoe and pointed it at the dog. Pete buried his slobbery face between his paws and Jay couldn't help but smile.

"Crazy mutt." Jay dropped the shoe. "So I guess I keep you and buy new shoes. Someday, buddy, someday it'll be one shoe too many. You're too old for this kind of behavior."

The dog's ears perked. Jay walked to the window and looked out. A truck was pulling away from the house at the end of the dirt lane. Two days after the fact and he remembered what the Chief had told him: keep an eye on things at Lacey's. Well, now it would be easy, because Lacey was next door.

He turned and pointed toward the back door. Pete stood up, like standing took a lot of effort, and lumbered to the door. "Outside today, my friend. Enjoy the wading pool, and don't chew up the lawn furniture."

One last look back and Pete went out the door, his sad eyes pleading with Jay for a reprieve. "Not today, Pete."

Jay walked across his yard, his attention on the house not far from his. A five-acre section of pasture separated them. He could see Lacey standing in the yard, pulling on the cord of a push mower.

He glanced at his watch. He had time before he had to head to work. Pushing aside his better sense, he headed down the road to see if she needed help.

"Good morning, neighbor." She stopped pulling and smiled when he walked up. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks." He moved a little closer. "Do you want me to start it for you?"

"If you can. I've been pulling on that thing for five minutes."

"Does it have gas in it?"

She bit down on her bottom lip and her hands slid into her pockets. "I didn't check."

He would have laughed, but she already looked devastated. Mowing the lawn was probably a big part of the having-a-house adventure. He wouldn't tease her. He also wouldn't burst her bubble by telling her it wouldn't stay fun for long.

"Do you have a gas can?"

"By the porch. Cody brought it. I just figured the mower was full." She went to get the can of gas. Cody was a good guy to bring it. Jay liked the husband of one of his childhood friends, Bailey Cross.

Jay opened the gas cap, pushed the machine and shook his head. "No gas. He probably filled the gas can on the way over, so you'd have it."

"Of course." She had the gas can and he took it from her to fill the tank.

"I can mow it for you."

"No, I want to do it. Remember, I've never had a lawn."

The front door opened. Lacey's sister stepped out with the baby in her arms. The child was crying, her arms flailing the air. Corry shot a look in his direction. He tried not to notice the eyes that were rimmed with dark circles, or the way perspiration beaded across her pale face. He looked away.

"She won't stop crying." Corry pushed the baby into Lacey's arms.

"Did you burp her?" Lacey lifted the infant to her shoulder. "Corry, you have to take care of her. She's your daughter. You're all she has."

"I don't want to be all she has. How can I take care of her?"

“The same way thousands of moms take care of their children. You have to use a little common sense.” Lacey made it look easy, leaning to kiss the baby’s cheek, talking in quiet whispers that soothed the little girl.

He could have disagreed with Lacey. Not all moms knew how to take care of children. He’d been a police officer for five years. He’d seen a lot.

“I should go. I have to work today, but I wanted to make sure you have everything you need.” He told himself he wasn’t running from something uncomfortable.

“We’re good.” Lacey looked down at the baby. “Jay, thanks for this place.”

“It needed to be rented.” He shrugged it off. “But you’re welcome.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” Corry moved forward, her thin arms crossed in front of her, hugging herself tight. “Aren’t you going to tell him about the stove?”

Lacey smiled. “It isn’t a big deal. I can fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“One of the knobs is broken. I have to go to Springfield tonight. I can pick one up.”

“What are you going to Springfield for?” Corry pushed herself into the conversation.

“None of your business.” Lacey snuggled the baby and avoided looking at either of them. And Jay couldn’t help but be curious. It was a hazard of his job. What was she up to?

“I can fix the stove, Lacey,” he offered.

“Jay, I don’t want you to think you have to run over here and fix every little thing that goes wrong. I’m pretty self-sufficient. I can even change my own lightbulbs.”

“I’m sure you can.” He looked at his watch. “Tell you what. You pick up the knob. I’ll have my dad come over and fix it tomorrow.”

That simplified everything. It meant he stayed out of her business. And she didn’t feel like he was taking care of her.

“Good.” She smiled her typical Lacey smile, full of optimism.

He had to take that thought back. Her sister showing up in town had emptied her of that glass-half-full attitude. Maybe her cheerful attitude did have limits.

“Do you want to see if the mower will start now?” He recapped the gas can and set it on the ground next to the mower. Lacey still held the baby.

“No, I have to get ready for work now.”

“See you at the diner.” He tipped his hat and escaped.

When he glanced back over his shoulder, they were walking back into the house and he wondered if Lacey would survive her sister being in her life.

And if he would survive the two of them in his.

Chapter Three



"I can't stay out here all day, alone." Corry paced through the sunlit living room of the farmhouse, plopping down on the overstuffed floral sofa that Lacey had bought used the previous day.

Lacey turned back to the window and watched as Jay made his way down the road to the home he'd grown up in. A perfect house for a perfect life.

For a while he'd even had a perfect girlfriend, Cindy, a law student and daughter of a doctor. The perfect match. Or maybe not. He was back at home, and Cindy was off to California pursuing her career. Lacey knew all of this through the rumor mill, which worked better than any small-town paper.

And the other thing they said was that it was all because of Jamie. But no one really talked about who Jamie was and what she meant to Jay Blackhorse.

"Come on, Lace, stop ignoring me." Corry, petulant and high-strung. Lacey sighed and turned back around.

"You'll have to stay here. I have to work, and I can't entertain you."

"I'll go to town with you."

"No, you're not going with me."

"Why not?" Corry plopped down on the sofa and put her feet up on the coffee table.

"Because I said so." Lacey rubbed a hand across her face. "This is not what I want to do every day, Corry. I don't want to raise you. You're a grown woman and a mother. If you're going to be bored, we'll find a sitter for Rachel and you can get a job."

Corry frowned and drew her legs up under her. The baby slept in the bassinet someone from church had donated to their new home. They both looked at the lace-covered basket.

"You know I can't work," she whispered, for a moment looking vulnerable.

"You stay home with the baby, Corry. Be a good mom and let me worry about working."

"I'm not worried about it."

Of course she wasn't. "Fine, then you can be responsible for cooking dinner."

"I can't cook. Well, maybe mac-n-cheese or sandwiches. Not much else."

"You can learn. I have cookbooks."

At the word *cookbook* she saw Corry's eyes glaze over, and the younger woman looked away.

"I want to call my friends and let them know where I am." Corry plucked at the fabric on the couch. "They'll be wondering what happened to me."

Lacey shook her head, fighting the sliver of fear that snaked into her belly when she thought about the kind of friends that Corry had. She didn't want that old life invading Gibson.

"You can't drag the old in with the new, Corry."

"Just because you walked away from everyone doesn't mean that I have to."

"I didn't walk away, I started over."

"I don't see how you can like it here."

Lacey stood up but didn't answer. She picked up her cell phone and slipped it into her pocket, a way to let Corry know that she meant it when she said her sister couldn't contact people from her past.

"I'll be home by four o'clock. But after dinner, I have to go to Springfield for a few hours."

"Fine, have fun. Don't worry about me, stuck out here, alone, nothing to do."

"I won't."

Lacey grabbed the backpack off the hook on the wall and walked out the front door, letting it bang shut behind her. She heaved the backpack over her shoulder and glanced back, seeing Corry on the sofa, watching.

She couldn't tell Corry about the classes in Springfield, or what they meant to her. Corry wouldn't understand. Lacey was one month away from finishing high school. She would finally have a piece of paper to show that she had accomplished her goal.

As soon as the GED certificate was in her hands, she wanted to enroll in college. She wanted to be a teacher.

She wanted to help children who, like Corry, had never had a chance. Maybe if those children had someone to believe in them, their lives would take different paths than the path her sister had taken.

* * *

It was after ten o'clock Friday night when Jay saw headlights easing down the long drive to the old farmhouse that Lacey had rented. He dropped his book and went to the window.

"Who is it?" His mom turned down the volume on the news program she was watching.

"I'm not sure. Someone pulling into Lacey's."

Lacey's house was dark.

"You should go check on them. They don't have a phone yet." His mom had joined him at the window. She peered out into the dark night. Clouds covered the full moon but Jay could see stars to the south.

"Mom, I think they can take care of themselves." He shrugged off his own curiosity. "I'm not her keeper."

"You're also a nice guy. Don't try to pretend you're not." His mom gave him the mom look. "Jay, she's a sweet girl and she's worked hard to change her life."

"I'm sure she has. But I also don't think you can take in every stray that comes along."

"Okay, fine." She peered out the window again and then shrugged as if she didn't care.

"If it makes you happy, I'll go check on her. But I have a feeling she isn't going to appreciate it."

"Maybe not, but I will." She smiled at him, and he knew he'd lost the battle.

He grabbed a flashlight and his sidearm, sliding it into the holster he hadn't removed when he'd walked through the door thirty minutes earlier.

Pete woofed from the dog bed near the fireplace. The dog didn't bother getting up. He was retired from the police force and usually didn't care who did what.

Jay walked out the door and headed across a field bathed in silver light as the clouds floated overhead. Pete woofed again and he heard the dog door flap as the lazy animal ran to catch up with him. Obviously Pete had decided the action was worth getting up for. Five years of sniffing drugs and searching for lost kids, and now he spent most of his time sniffing rabbit trails and chewing up perfectly good shoes.

A shadow lingered in the front yard of the old farmhouse. Pete lumbered to Jay's side, growling a low warning. Jay's hand went to his sidearm and he walked more carefully, deliberately keeping an eye on the form that had stilled when the dog barked.

Pete took off, his long legs pounding and his jaws flapping. The person in the yard ran for the car and was scrambling onto the hood. The outdoor security light had been shot out by kids nearly a year earlier. As clouds covered the moon, Jay thought about the mistake of not getting that light fixed.

"Who's there?" He recognized the trembling voice.

"Pete, down." The dog immediately obeyed Jay's command. He walked through the gate and crossed the lawn to find Lacey cowering on the hood of her own car. He should have recognized the headlights of her Chevy.

"Where in the world did he come from?" She didn't move to climb down from the car. He almost laughed, but she had books and she might throw them.

"He's mine."

"Do you always sic him on people when they come home at night?"

He held a hand out and she refused the offer. Lacey Gould, afraid? How did he process that information? She always seemed a little like David, confronting the world with five stones and a lot of faith.

And she collected dogs. Of course, not real ones.

"I didn't know it was you. I saw a car pulling up to a dark house, late."

She grasped the books and shot him a "stupid male" look. "So, I can't come home late?"

"You were in Springfield this late?"

"Do you interrogate all of your renters?"

"No, I don't interrogate all of them. It was a question, Lacey. You were going to Springfield after work. It's late. We saw headlights down here and we were worried. Mom was worried."

Her shoulders slumped. "I have to get inside. I have the breakfast shift and I have to be at work at five in the morning."

"Let me help you down."

"Jay, do me a favor, grab your dog."

"He won't hurt you."

"He's huge and he has big teeth."

"You're afraid of dogs." More information to process. He reached for Pete's collar. "What about that dog collection of yours?"

He shouldn't have asked. Asking meant he wanted to know something about her, something that didn't quite make sense. He wanted to deny that she was a mystery to solve.

He definitely didn't want to get involved.

"I love collecting dogs." She stared at Pete. "The kind without teeth."

"Toy ones." He smiled and she glared.

"Don't tell anyone. How embarrassing would it be if everyone knew?"

"People can be afraid of dogs, Lacey."

"It's a ridiculous fear. Some dogs bite."

"Pete doesn't bite."

She smiled. "But if he did, he'd take a big bite."

"He chews on shoes, but he barely chews his own dog food."

"You chew it for him?"

"Now that's disgusting."

She slid down from the hood of the car, but stayed on the other side of the vehicle. "I need to get some sleep. Thank you for checking on us."

He nodded and in the sliver of moonlight that filtered through a break in the clouds he read the book in her hand. *Algebra 2*. She hugged it tight to her chest.

"You don't have to know all of my secrets, Jay. At least you know I wasn't in town and up to no good."

"I never thought that." But hadn't he wondered? When she'd said she was going to Springfield tonight, hadn't he suspected something?

"You did. And that's fine."

She turned and walked away. He held on to Pete's collar and watched her go. Her back was straight and her step was less than bouncy.

Pete pulled, trying to go after her. Jay almost agreed with the dog, but decided against it. One thing he didn't need was more information about Lacey Gould.

* * *

Saturday mid-morning and the diner was full. Every table. Lacey hurried to the table where the Golden Girls were having Saturday brunch. Not that the Hash-It-Out served brunch; for Gibson, that meant a late breakfast if Jolynn still had biscuits left.

"Lacey, honey, how are you doing?" Elsbeth Jenkins pointed to her coffee cup. She could chat as much as anyone, and Lacey knew the older lady really did care. But Elsbeth did have her priorities. Coffee first.

"I'm doing fine, Miss Jenkins." Lacey poured the cup of coffee and handed her a few more creamers. "Is there anything else?"

"No, honey, nothing else. We're just going to sit and chat for a bit. Is Bailey working today?" Goldie Johnson asked.

"No, ma'am, she's not working today. She's only here when we're short on help."

"How is she feeling?" Goldie nodded as she spoke.

"She's feeling great and she and Cody're excited about the baby."

"Honey, did that grandson of mine ever write to you?" Elsbeth stirred two creamers into the tiny coffee cup and turned the liquid nearly white.

Lance had taken a job in Georgia shortly after the two of them broke up. And she hadn't really missed him. She realized now that she had been more in love with the idea of love than in love with Lance. It had been wrong to start a relationship based on a desire to be a part of this town, a family and something that would last forever.

"No, Miss Jenkins, I haven't heard from him. Is he doing okay in Atlanta?"

"Oh, I don't know. You know how men are, they don't talk a lot. But I'm really sorry that things didn't work out between the two of you."

The cowbell over the door banged and clanged. Lacey looked up, glad for the distraction. And then not so glad. Jay walked in, blue-and-gray uniform starched and pressed. He looked her way and then looked the other way.

She swallowed and started to move away from the Golden Girls but one of them stopped her. "Honey, now that's a boy that needs a good woman like you."

"No, I don't think so." Lacey smiled anyway.

Jay sat down with a couple of guys close to his age. They were dusty from work and their boots had tracked in half the dirt from the farm. Lacey had just finished sweeping up before the Golden Girls came in.

"Would you like coffee?" She asked because she knew he'd say no. He always did, and it was fun to watch his eyes narrow when she asked.

"Water, and a burger. No fries." He moved the menu to the side.

"Extra lettuce." *Health nut*. She smiled. "Be just a few minutes."

"Thanks." He didn't look at her.

"You roping tonight?" one of the other guys asked Jay as she walked away.

"Yeah, I'm working with a horse that a guy from Tulsa brought up to me."

"How does it feel to be home?" the other guy, Joey, asked.

Lacey paused at the door to the kitchen to hear him say, "It's always good to come home."

When Lacey took Jay his burger, he actually smiled. She refilled his water glass and turned, but a hand caught hers. Not Jay's hand.

"Hey, Lacey, how about you come to the rodeo with me tonight?" Joey Gaston winked and his hand remained on hers.

Lacey pulled her hand free. She could feel heat sliding up her cheeks and she couldn't look at Jay. "I don't think so, Joey."

"Oh, come on, we'd have a good time." He smiled, showing dimples that probably charmed a lot of girls.

"I'm not into a 'good time,' Joey." She wasn't good enough to take home to meet their families, but she was good enough for a back road on a Saturday night.

Lance had done that for her.

"Leave her alone, Joey." Jay's voice, quiet but firm.

Lacey couldn't look at Jay, but she knew that tone in his voice. And Joey knew it, too. He sat back in his chair, staring at Jay, brows raised.

"I was just kidding. I've got a girlfriend."

"Oh, that makes it *way* more amusing, Joey." Lacey walked away, pretending no one stared and that she hadn't been humiliated.

For six years she'd been accepted in Gibson. Dating Lance had been the mistake that changed everything.

She walked through the swinging doors into the kitchen and leaned against the wall. The doors swung open and Jolynn was there. "Honey, don't you listen to those boys. Remember, they're just young pups that need to have their ears boxed. The people who count, the people who love you, know better."

Lacey nodded, and wiped away the tear that broke loose and trickled down her cheek. "I know. Thanks, Jo."

"You can always count on me, sweetie. You know you're my kid and I love you."

The one tear multiplied and Jolynn hugged her tight, the way a mother would hug a daughter. The way Lacey had only dreamed of when she'd been a child growing up.

Chapter Four



Lacey pulled up the driveway to her house and then just sat in the car, too tired to get out. After a long breakfast and lunch shift at the diner, her feet were killing her and her head ached.

She didn't want to deal with Corry after dealing with Joey back at the diner. She didn't want to clean the house after cleaning tables all day. It would have been great to come home and sit by herself on the front porch.

Instead she knew she had to go inside and face her sister. She had to face that dinner probably wasn't cooked, and Corry probably wasn't any more appreciative today than she'd been yesterday.

As she walked up the steps a car drove past. Jay in his truck coming home from work. She waved and he waved back. He was going to the rodeo tonight. She used to go a lot, but not lately. Lately had been about work and classes, and when she had spare time, she studied.

She opened the front door and walked into the slightly muggy house, not completely cool because the window air conditioners were old. A huge mess greeted her.

"What in the world is going on here?" Lacey walked into her beautiful new living room with the hardwood floors and cobalt-blue braided rugs. From the arched doorway she could see through the dining room to the kitchen with the white-painted cabinets.

Everything was a mess. Clothes littered the floors. Dirty dishes covered the counters and trash covered the floor. A radio blasted rock music and the baby was crying.

"Corry, where are you?" Lacey picked up the wailing baby and hurried through the house.

"I'm here." A voice mumbled from the back porch.

"What are you doing, taking a nap? You have a baby to feed. The house is a disaster and you were supposed to cook."

Corry was curled up on the wicker couch, hair straggling across her face. She was wearing the same clothes she'd worn the previous day. Lacey leaned over, looking into eyes that were blurry and a smile that drooped.

"What have you done?" Lacey reached for the phone, ready to call 911.

"Cold medicine. Just cold medicine."

"How much."

"Just enough. Get off my back."

"Did you have to trash my house?"

Lacey walked away, still holding Rachel close. Words were rolling through her mind, wanting to come out. She couldn't say what she wanted to say. She couldn't stand next to her sister, for fear she would hurt her. Corry was already hurting herself.

"I'm so angry with you, Corry. I can't believe you would do this. You have a baby." Lacey stopped in front of the corner curio in the living room and started picking up the few dogs that had been knocked off the shelves.

"Stop being a prude," Corry snarled.

"Stop being selfish."

"I have a friend coming to get me next week." Corry sat up, leaning forward, her stringy dark hair hanging down over her face.

"How did you call a friend?"

"I used your boyfriend's phone. His mother let me in."

"Leave Mrs. Blackhorse alone." Lacey crossed back to her sister, kneeling in front of her and turning Corry's face so that they made eye contact. "Stay away from Jay and his family."

"Why? Are you afraid of what they'll think of you if they meet me?" Corry smiled a hazy smile. "Too late. I think they were impressed."

Lacey stood back up. The baby cried against her shoulder, reminding her that it was time to eat. "I can't have you living here like this, Corry."

She couldn't let Corry destroy everything she'd built. Lacey had a life here, and friends. She belonged. For the first time in her life, she'd found a place where she belonged.

"I plan on leaving. I'm not going to stay and live like a hermit." Corry's words reminded Lacey of the phone call.

And the crying baby. "You can't take Rachel back to St. Louis. That isn't good for her. How are you going to take care of her if you can't take care of yourself?"

"I'll manage. Don't worry about me. Remember, I'm a woman and we know how to take care of babies. It's easy, right?"

"It isn't easy, Corry. I know that. But this baby deserves a chance. And it's her that I'm worried about, not you."

She walked away because she couldn't argue. And the baby needed to be fed. She could concentrate on Rachel and let the rest go.

She was heating the bottle when Corry walked into the room. Rachel squirmed against Lacey, tiny hands brushing Lacey's face. Corry looked through blurry eyes, but maybe she was also sorry. Lacey wanted her to be sorry.

"Corry, this can't be the life you want for yourself."

"What's wrong with my life?"

"It doesn't include faith. It doesn't include you wanting a better life for yourself and your child."

"I'm here."

"Yes, you are here." Lacey tested the formula on her wrist and cradled Rachel to feed her. Corry only watched.

"Do you like that cowboy?" Corry leaned against the counter. She shoved her trembling hands into her pockets and hunkered down, defeated.

Lacey ignored the obvious signs of someone going through withdrawal. She knew that was the reason for the cold medicine. Her sister would have done anything for a high at this point.

"He isn't even a friend, just someone I know from town and from church."

For a minute it felt like a normal conversation between sisters. To keep up the illusion, Lacey kept her gaze averted.

"I think I could have more luck with him. You're too pushy." The normal moment between sisters ended with that comment.

Lacey lifted Rachel to her shoulder and patted the baby's back. "Stop it, Corry."

"Are you jealous?"

"There's nothing to be jealous of. I don't want him used. End of story."

"When did you get all righteous? Does he know what you used to be?"

Lacey turned to face her sister. She could feel heat crawling up her neck to her cheeks. "My past is behind me. And it wasn't who I…" She blinked a few times, wishing there weren't tears in her eyes. "It wasn't who I wanted to be."

She didn't belong. Not the way she really wanted to belong to Gibson. After all of these years, she wasn't really one of them. She wanted to be like these people, growing up here, having lifelong friends, family that never moved away, and a place that was all hers.

"Not so easy to be a goody-goody now, is it? Not with me here to remind you of what you used to be. What you still are."

Take a deep breath, she told herself. She wasn't that girl from St. Louis, not here in Gibson. Her past was forgiven. She had to remember who she was now, and who she was in Christ. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son.*

She was the "whosoever" who had chosen to believe in Jesus. She would not perish, but have everlasting life. They sang a song in church, "My Sins Are Gone." It was her song. Anyone could ask her why she was happy, how she could smile and go on, building a new life. The answer was simple: because her sins were gone, as far as east from west. Her sister could remind her, but she couldn't bring back what had been forgiven. Not really.

"I'm a Christian, Corry. I have faith. I have a new life, and that old life is no longer a part of me."

"Really? You might want to think it's gone, but it's still there."

"I am who I am because of my past, Corry. But God gave me a new life."

"And what makes you so special?"

"I'm not special. I made a choice that anyone can make."

"A past isn't that easy to get rid of." Corry shook her head and walked off, tossing the words over her shoulder. "You're the one living in a fantasy world. By the way, someone's here."

* * *

Jay knocked on the door because he had promised Cody and Bailey he would. They'd been trying to call Lacey, but she wasn't answering her cell phone. They were worried. He could have told them that Lacey Gould could take care of herself, but they wouldn't have listened.

They were a lot like his mom, determined to make sure Lacey was kept safe. As if she needed protection.

From the sounds coming from inside the house, he guessed that right now she wanted rid of her sister. He knocked again.

She opened the door, hair a little shaggier than normal and liner under her eyes a little smudged. She didn't smile.

"Bailey wanted me to stop and check on you."

"Why?"

"She's been trying to call and she can't get hold of you."

Lacey reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She frowned at it and then slipped it back into her pocket. "No signal."

"Okay, I'll let them know." He glanced past her. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head a little, as if she really didn't understand his question.

"Lacey, is everything okay?"

"Fine." She glanced over her shoulder, at the mess, at the broken dogs, at the clothes scattered on the floor. "I'm sorry, I'll get it cleaned up."

"I'm not talking about the house. I know you'll get it cleaned up. I'm asking if *you're* okay."

The baby was crying, and the radio played from the kitchen. Lacey Gould's eyes watered and her nose turned pink.

"Let me help you clean up." He walked past her, into the ransacked house. "Is she looking for a fix?"

"She is." Lacey walked away from him. "Let me get the baby."

"I'll get a broom."

"You don't have to. You have somewhere you need to be and I'm here for the night. It won't take me long to clean up." She walked back into the room with the baby cuddled against her. Exhaustion etched lines across her face and her shoulders heaved with a sigh.

Jay offered her a smile that he knew wouldn't ease her worry or take away the burden. Instead he bent and started picking up the dog figurines that were still intact. The dogs meant something to her. He thought it was more about a life she had never had than a pet she wanted.

"We could get her help." He offered the suggestion as he put the last dog in place. "We could try for a seventy-two hour hold and maybe get her into a treatment program."

"She has to want help."

"I guess you're right." He stood up straight. He hadn't realized before that she was a good half-foot shorter than his six feet two inches.

He felt as though he towered over her.

"Thanks for stopping by, Jay. If you see Bailey, tell her I'm fine."

"You could ride along and tell her yourself. It probably would be good for you to get out for a while."

"Ride along?" She stared and then shook her head. "I don't think you want to start that rumor."

"It won't start rumors."

"It would, and you really don't want your name linked to mine."

He didn't. She was right. He didn't want his name linked to anyone else's name because three years of Cindy had cured him of his dreams of getting married, having the picket fence and a few kids. He didn't want a woman that would only be a replacement for what he'd lost years ago. Somewhere along the way Cindy had figured that out.

The baby was crying. "I can't go, Jay. Corry is strung out and I can't leave the baby here."

"Bring the baby."

Her eyes widened. For a long moment she stood there, staring at him, staring at the door. Finally she nodded.

"I will go." She hurried into the kitchen and came back with a diaper bag and the baby still held against her shoulder. "But I have to change clothes first. I smell like a cheeseburger."

"Okay." He didn't expect her to shove the baby into his arms, but she did. The wiggling infant fit into the crook of his elbow, her hands grasping at the air. "Umm, Lacey, the baby…"

She had already reached the bedroom door. "What?"

How did he admit to this? Honesty seemed to be the answer, but he knew he wouldn't get sympathy. "I've never held a baby."

"You've never held a baby. Isn't your dad an OB-GYN? And you've never held a baby?"

"Never." He swallowed a little because his heart was doing a funny dance as he held this baby and he couldn't stop looking at Lacey Gould. And she had the nerve to laugh at him.

"Sit down before you drop her. You look a little pale."

He sat down, still clutching the tiny little girl in his arms. He smiled down at her, and man if she didn't smile back, her grin half-tilted and making her nose scrunch.

"Now aren't you something else." He leaned, talking softly, and she smiled again. "You're a little charmer. I think I'd just about buy you a pony."

"She wants a bay." Lacey was back, still smiling. She had changed into jeans and a peasant top that flowed out over the top of her jeans. Her hair spiked around her face and she had wiped away the smudged liner.

"Ready to go?" He handed the baby over, still unsure with her in his arms. And as he looked at Lacey Gould, she was one more thing that he was suddenly unsure about.

"I'm ready to go."

He held the door and let Lacey walk out first, because he was afraid to walk out next to her, afraid of what it might feel like to be close to her when she smelled like lavender.

* * *

Lacey leaned close to the window, trying not to look like an overanxious puppy leaning out the truck as they drove onto the rodeo grounds. Stock trailers were parked along the back section and cars were parked in the field next to the arena.

She had been before, more times than she could count, but never like this, in a truck with a stock trailer hooked to the back and a cowboy sitting in the seat next to her. Riding with Bailey and

Cody didn't count, not this way. If other girls dreamed of fairy-tale dances and diamonds, Lacey dreamed of this, of boots and cowboys and horses.

Not so much the cowboys these days, but still…

"Don't fall out." Jay smiled as he said it, white teeth flashing in a suntanned face. His hat was on the seat next to him and his dark hair that brushed his collar showed the ring where the hat had been.

She shifted in the seat and leaned back. "I guess you're not at all excited?"

"Of course I am. I've been living in the city for eight years. Longer if you count college. It's good to be home full-time."

"What events are you in?"

"A little of everything. I mainly team rope. But every now and then I ride a bull."

"I want to ride a bull." She hadn't meant to sound like a silly girl, but his eyes widened and he shook his head.

"Maybe you could try barrel racing?" He made the suggestion without looking at her.

"Okay."

Anything. It was all a part of the dream package she'd created for herself. She wanted this life, with these people. For a long time she'd wanted love and acceptance.

She'd found those things in Gibson. Now she wanted horses and a farm of her own. Jay wouldn't understand that dream; he'd always had those things.

"Lacey, we're not that different. This has been my life, but I came home to reclaim what I left behind."

"And it cost you?"

"It cost me." He slowed, and then eased back into a space next to another truck and trailer.

"Are you team roping tonight?" She looked back, at the pricked ears of the horse in the trailer.

"Yeah, and I think I have to ride a bull. Cody signed me up. He says he needs a little competition from time to time."

"Because Bailey is keeping him close to home." She bit down on her bottom lip and looked out the window.

The truck stopped, the trailer squeaking behind it, coming to a halt. The horse whinnied and other horses answered. From the pens behind the arena, cattle mooed, restless from being corralled for so long.

Lacey breathed deep, loving it all. And the man next to her…she glanced in his direction. He was a surprise. He had invited her.

And she had to process that information.

Time to come back to earth, and to remember what it felt like to be hurt, to have her trust stomped on. Lacey unbuckled the baby and pulled her out of the seat, a good distraction because Rachel's eyes were open and she smiled that baby half-smile. Drool trickled down her baby chin.

"Do you think Corry will stay?" Jay had unbuckled his seat belt and he pulled the keys from the ignition of the truck.

The question was one that Lacey had considered, but didn't want to. It made her heart ache to think of Corry leaving, not knowing where she would take the baby. Lacey shrugged and pulled Rachel, cooing and soft, close to her.

"I really don't know. I don't want to think about that." She kissed the baby's cheek. "But I guess I should."

"Maybe she'll stay."

"She won't. She's restless. She's always been restless."

"I understand restless." He stepped out of the truck. Lacey, baby in her arms and diaper bag over her shoulder, followed. She met up with him at the back of the trailer. The small glimpse into his life intrigued her. He'd never been open.

"You don't seem restless." She stood back as he opened the trailer and led the horse out. Not his horse, he'd explained, but one he was training. The animal was huge, with a golden-brown coat that glistened.

He glanced at her, shrugging and then went back to the horse. He pulled a saddle out of the tack compartment of the trailer. Expertly tooled and polished, the leather practically glowed in the early evening light.

The lights of the arena came on and Lacey knew that the bleachers would be filling up. But she couldn't walk away because Jay had stories, just like everyone else.

"How could you be restless?" She pushed, forgetting for a moment that he was little more than a stranger.

"Why is that so unusual?" He had the saddle on the horse and was pulling the girth strap tight around the animal's middle. The horse, a gentle giant, stood still, head low and ears pricked forward.

"You don't seem restless."

"Really? And what makes you think you know anything about me?" He straightened, tall and all cowboy in new Wranglers and worn boots. His western shirt was from the mall, not the farm store.

Contradictions. And she loved a mystery.

"So, tell me." She waited, holding the baby in the crook of her arm, but dropping the diaper bag.

"I grew up on a farm in a small town, Lacey. I wanted to live in the city, to experience life in an apartment with close neighbors."

"And you loved it?" She smiled, because he couldn't have.

He grinned back at her. "I did, for a while. But then the new wore off and it was just noise, traffic and the smell of exhaust."

"So you came home because you got tired of city life?"

"I came home." And he didn't finish, but she knew that he'd come home because of a broken heart. Sometimes she saw it in his eyes. Sometimes he looked like someone who had been broken, but was gluing the pieces back together.

"Your parents are glad."

"I know they are." He slipped the reins over the neck of the horse. "And Lacey, before you start thinking I'm one of those poor strays behind the diner, I'm not. Cindy didn't break my heart."

He winked. For a moment she almost believed that his heart hadn't been broken. For a fleeting second she wanted to hold him. To be held by a cowboy with strong arms and roots that went deep in a community.

"I didn't…" She didn't know what to say. She didn't need to know? Or she didn't plan on trying to fix him?

"You did. Your eyes get all weepy and you look like you've found someone who needs fixing. I don't. I'm glad to be home."

He was standing close to her, and she hadn't realized before that his presence would suck the air out of her space, not until that moment. Her lungs tightened inside her chest and she took a step back, kissing the baby's head to distract her thoughts from the man, all cowboy, standing in front of her.

He cocked his head to the side and his mouth opened, but then closed and he shook his head. "I need to find Cody."

"Of course." She backed away. "I'll meet up with you later."

And later she would have her thoughts back in control and she wouldn't be thinking of him as the cowboy who picked up those silly dog figurines and put them back on the shelf while she swept up the pieces of what had been broken.

Chapter Five



Lacey hurried away, ignoring the desire to glance over her shoulder, to see if he was watching. He wouldn't watch. He would get on his horse, shaking his head because she had climbed into his life that way.

She had no business messing in his life; she was a dirty sock, mistakenly tossed in the basket with the clean socks. She couldn't hide from reality.

Jay was the round peg in the round hole. He fit. He was a part of Gibson and someday, he'd marry a girl from Gibson. And Lacey didn't know why that suddenly bothered her, or why it bothered her that when he looked at her, it was with that look, the one that said she was the community stray, taken in and fed, given a safe place to stay.

The way she fed stray cats behind the diner.

"Hey, Lacey, up here."

She looked up, searching the crowd. When she saw Bailey, she waved. Bailey had a seat midway up the bleachers, with a clear view of the chutes. Lacey climbed the steps and squeezed past a couple of people to take a seat next to her friend.

"I didn't expect to see you here." Bailey held her hands out and took the baby, her own belly growing rounder every day.

"Long story." Lacey searched the crowd of men behind the pens. She sought a tall cowboy wearing a white hat, his shirt plaid. She found him, standing next to the buckskin and talking to one of the other guys.

"Make it a short story and fill me in." Bailey leaned a shoulder against Lacey's. "You okay?"

"Hmmm?" Lacey nodded. She didn't want to talk, not here, with hundreds of people surrounding them, eating popcorn or cotton candy and drinking soda from paper cups.

"Are you okay?" Louder voice now, a little impatient.

"I'm great." Lacey leaned back on the bleacher seat. "My sister wrecked my house and she's passed out in my bed. The cowboy that lives down the lane treats me like an interloper. I'm living in his grandparents' house, and he doesn't want me there."

"He brought you tonight."

"He did. I'm a charity case. He felt bad because Corry broke my dogs."

Bailey nodded. "He's about to ride a bull. But since you've sworn off men, I guess that doesn't matter to you?"

"I have a reason for swearing off men. I'm never going to be the type of woman a man takes home to meet his family."

"Lance has problems, Lacey. That isn't about you, it's about him."

"It is about me. It takes a lot for anyone to understand where I've been and what I've done. I'm ashamed of the life I lived, so why should I expect a man to blindly accept my past?"

"You're forgetting what God has done in your life. You're forgetting what He can still do. You're not a finished product. None of us are. Our stories are still being written."

"No, I'm not forgetting." Lacey looked away, because she couldn't admit that sometimes she wondered how God could forgive. How could He take someone as dirty as she felt and turn them into someone people respected?

She worked really hard trying to be that person that others respected.

The bulls ran through the chutes. Lacey leaned back, watching as cowboy after cowboy got tossed. Each time one of them hit the dirt, she cringed. She didn't really want to ride a bull.

"Jay's up." Bailey pointed. Taller than the other bull riders, he stood on the outside of the chute. The bull moved in the chute, a truck-sized animal, pawing the ground.

"I really don't want to watch."

"It isn't easy." Bailey shifted Rachel, now sleeping, on her shoulder. "It doesn't get easier. Every time I watch Cody ride, I pray, close my eyes, peek, pray some more."

"Yes, but you love Cody."

"True. The cowboy in question is just your neighbor."

"Exactly." Lacey laughed and glanced at Bailey, willing to give her friend what she wanted to hear. "He's cute, Bailey, I'm not denying that. But I'm not looking for cute."

"Of course not."

"I'm not looking—period."

"But it is okay to look." Bailey smiled a happy smile and elbowed Lacey. "There he goes."

The gate opened and the bull spun out of the opening, coming up off the ground like a ballet dancer. Amazing that an animal so huge could move like that. The thud when the beast came down jarred the man on his back and Jay fell back, moving his free arm forward.

The buzzer sounded and Jay jumped, landing clear of the animal, but hitting the ground hard. The bull didn't want to let it go. The animal turned on Jay, charging the cowboy, who was slow getting up.

A bullfighter jumped between the beast and the man, giving Jay just enough time to escape, to jump on the fence and wait for the distracted animal to make up his mind that he'd rather not take a piece out of a cowboy.

Jay looked up, his hat gone. His dark gaze met Lacey's and stayed there, connected, for just a few seconds. Warm brown eyes in a face that was lean and handsome. And then he hopped down from the fence and limped away.

"Breathe," Bailey whispered.

Lacey breathed. It wasn't easy. She inhaled a gulp of air and her heart raced.

* * *

The rodeo ended with steer wrestling. Jay watched from behind the pens at the back of the arena, still smarting from the bull, and still thinking about Lacey Gould's dark brown eyes. He shook his head and walked away, back to his trailer and his horse.

"That was quite a ride." Cody slapped Jay on the back as he untied his horse.

"Thanks. I'm glad it made you happy."

"Oh, come on, you enjoyed it." Cody leaned against the side of the trailer, his hat pushed back on his head. "You'll do it again next week."

"I'm thinking no." Jay tightened his grip on Buck's reins because the horse was tossing his head, whinnying to a nearby mare. "I think I'll stick to roping."

"Yeah, I think I'm done with bull riding, too. I've got a baby on the way."

"Right, that does sound like a good reason to stop."

"Yeah, it does." Cody smiled like a guy who had it all. And he did. He had the wife, a child, the farm and a baby on the way. Jay had a diamond ring in a drawer and a room in his parents' house. He had a box of memories that he kept hidden in a closet.

"Speaking of wives and babies, I'm going to find my wife." Cody slapped him on the back again and walked away.

Jay pulled the saddle off the horse and limped to the back of his truck, his knee stiff and his back even stiffer. He tossed the saddle in the back of the truck and then leaned for a minute, wishing again that he hadn't ridden that bull. Bull riding wasn't a sport a guy jumped into.

He tried not to think about Lacey's face in the crowd, pale and wide-eyed as she watched him scramble to the fence, escaping big hooves and an animal that wanted to hurt him.

The horse whinnied, reminding him of work that still needed to be done. He walked back to the animal, rubbing Buck's sleek neck and then pulling off the bridle, leaving just the halter and lead rope. The horse nodded his head as if he approved.

"I'm getting too old for crazy stunts, Buck."

"You stayed on." The feminine voice from behind him was a little soft, a little teasing.

"Yep."

He turned and smiled at Lacey. She wasn't a friend, just someone his mom had picked up and brought home. He had friends, people he'd grown up with, gone to church with, known all his life. He didn't know where to put her, because she didn't fit those categories. Someone that he knew? A person that needed help? Someone passing through?

He would have preferred she stayed in Jolynn's apartment, not the house his grandparents had built. Jamie's house. But she was there now, and he'd deal with it. He moved away from his horse and straightened, raising his hands over his head to stretch the kinks out of his back.

She was here tonight, in his life, because he'd brought her. He had been trying not to think about that, or why he'd extended the offer. Maybe because of the pain in her eyes when she'd looked at those silly dogs her sister had broken.

Who got upset over something like that?

Lacey took cautious steps forward. She held the sleeping baby in one arm and had the diaper bag over her shoulder. She didn't carry a purse.

"You actually did pretty well," she encouraged, a shy smile on a face that shouldn't have been shy. He had never seen her as shy. She was the waitress who never backed down when the guys at the diner gave her a hard time.

"I did stay on, but it wasn't fun and it isn't something I want to do again. I think I'll stick to roping."

"You won the roping event." She moved forward, her hand sliding up the rump of his horse. "Want me to do something?"

"No, I've got it."

She stood next to him, her hand on his horse's neck. She didn't look at him, and he wondered why. Did she think that by not looking at him, she could hide her secrets?

"I'm going to put the baby in the truck." She moved away and he let her go. Buck pushed at him with his big, tan head, rubbing his jaw against Jay's shoulder.

"In the trailer, Buck." Jay opened the trailer and moved to the side. Buck went in, his hooves pounding on the floor of the trailer, rattling the metal sides as his weight shifted and settled.

"He's an amazing animal." Lacey had returned, without the baby. He was tying the horse to the front of the trailer. "When you rope on him, it's like he knows what you want him to do before you make a move."

"He's a smart animal." Jay latched the trailer.

"Thank you for letting me come with you tonight."

Jay shrugged, another movement that didn't feel too great. He stepped back against his trailer and brought her with him, because the truck next to them was pulling forward.

"I didn't mind." His hand was still on her arm.

She looked from his hand on her arm to his face. Her teeth bit into her bottom lip and she shivered, maybe from the cold night air.

It was dark and the band was playing. Jay could see people two-stepping on a temporary dance floor. Couples scooted in time to the music, and children ran in the open field, catching fireflies.

Lacey smelled like lavender and her arm was soft. She looked up, her eyes dark in a face that was soft, but tough. He moved his hand from her arm and touched her cheek.

She shook her head a little and took a step back, disengaging from his touch. But that small step didn't undo the moment. She was street-smart and vulnerable and he wanted to see how she felt in his arms.

He wanted to brush away the hurt look in her eyes, and the shame that caused her to look away too often. Instead, he came to his senses and pulled back, letting the moment slip away.

"We should go." Lacey stepped over the tongue of the trailer and put distance between them. Her arms were crossed and she had lost the vulnerable look. "Jay, whatever that was, it wasn't real."

"What?"

"It was moonlight. It was summertime and soft music. It was you being lonely and losing someone you thought you'd spend your life with."

"Maybe you're right."

"I am right. But I'm nobody's moment. Someday I want forever, but I'll never be a moment again."

He exhaled a deep breath and whistled low. "Okay, then I guess we should go."

He felt like the world's biggest loser.

* * *

Lacey woke up on Sunday morning, glad that she had a day off. If only she'd gotten some sleep, but she hadn't. Jay had dropped her off at midnight, and wound up from the night, she'd stayed up for two hours, cleaning.

She rolled over in bed, listening to the sound of country life drifting through the open window. Cows mooed from the field and somewhere a rooster crowed. He was a little late, but still trying to tell everyone that it was time to get up.

The baby cried and she heard Corry telling her to shush, as if the baby would listen and not expect to be fed. Lacey sat up and stretched. She had an hour to get ready before church.

When she walked through the door of the dining room, Corry was at the table with a bowl of cereal. Rachel was in the bassinet, arms flailing the air.

"Have you fed her?" Lacey picked up the tiny infant and held her close. The baby fussed too much. "Has she been to a doctor?"

"Give me a break. Like I have the money for that. She's fine."

"She's hungry and she feels warm."

"So, feed her, mother of the year."

"I'm not her mother, Corry."

Corry drank the milk from her bowl and took it to the sink. At least she did that much. Lacey took a deep breath and exhaled the brewing impatience. The baby curled against her shoulder, fist working in her tiny mouth.

"I'll feed her, you get ready for church." Lacey held the baby with one arm and reached in the drainer at the edge of the sink for a clean bottle.

"I'm not going to church."

"If you're staying with me, you're going to church."

"Make me go and you'll regret it."

"I probably will, but you're going." Lacey shook the bottle to mix the formula with the water. "I've already taken a shower. You can have yours now."

She turned away from Corry, but shuddered when the bathroom door slammed. "Well, little baby, this is probably something I'll pay for."

Rachel sucked at the bottle, draining it in no time and then burping loudly against Lacey's shoulder. She put the sleeping baby into the infant car seat and was strapping her in as Corry walked out of the bathroom. She wore a black miniskirt and a white tank top.

"You can't wear that."

"It's all I have." Gum smacked and Corry busied herself, far too happily, shoving diapers and wipes along with an extra bottle into the bag.

Rachel cried, a little restless and fussy.

"I think she's sick." Corry looked at the baby and then at Lacey. "What do you think?"

"She feels warm and her cheeks are a little pink. I don't know."

Corry unbuckled the straps and pulled Rachel out of the seat. "I think she has a fever."

"Do you have medicine for her?"

Corry nodded. "I have those drops. I'll give her some of those."

"And stay home with her. She shouldn't be out. You can stay here and let her sleep."

Corry's eyes widened. "Really? You're not going to make me go to church."

"I'm not going to make you." Lacey sighed. "Corry, no one can *make* you go to church. I only want you to try to get your life together and stay clean."

"And church is going to make it all better?"

"Church doesn't, but God does. He really does make things better when you trust Him." The act of going to church hadn't changed anything for Lacey. She had tried that routine as a teenager, because she'd known, really known that God could help, but each time she went into a church, thinking it would be a magic cure, it hadn't changed anything. Because she had thought it was about going to church.

In Gibson she had learned that it was about faith, about trusting God, not about going to church wishing people would love her. She had learned, too, about loving herself.

She needed to remember that, she realized. Since Lance, she'd had a tough time remembering her own clean slate and that she was worth loving.

Corry pushed through the diapers and wipes in the diaper bag and pulled out infant drops. She held them out to Lacey. "How much do I give her?"

Lacey took the bottle and looked at the back, reading the directions. "One dropper. And don't give her more until I get home. I'll be late, though. You'll have to fix your own lunch."

"Where are you going?"

"After church there are a few of us that go to the nursing home to sing and have church with the people there."

"Ah, isn't that sweet."

Lacey let it go. "I'll see you later."

Today Jay would be joining them at the nursing home. She wondered how the return of one man to his home-town could change everything. For years Gibson had been her safe place. Jay's presence undid that feeling.

Chapter Six



Jay looked across the room and caught the gaze of Lacey Gould. She sat next to an older woman with snow-white hair and hands that shook. They were flipping through the pages of a hymnal and talking in low tones that didn't carry.

But from time to time Lacey looked up at him. This time he caught her staring, and he hadn't expected the look in her eyes to be wariness. She didn't trust him.

Distracted, he dropped his guitar pick. He leaned to pick it up and Bailey kicked his shin. He nearly said something, but the way she was smiling, he couldn't. She'd been teasing him for twenty-some years. She probably wasn't going to stop now.

For years she'd been the little girl on the bus that he looked out for, and sometimes wanted to escape. She'd sent him a love note once. She'd been thirteen, he was sixteen. When he told her it wouldn't work, she cried and told her dad on him.

"She's a good person, Jay," Bailey whispered.

"I'm sure she is." He remembered that Bailey also had a good left hook and he didn't want to make her mad.

He didn't doubt that Lacey was a good person. He had watched her at church, making the rounds and speaking to everyone before the service began. As soon as church ended, she said her good-byes and drove to the nursing home.

He had questions about her community service, but it wasn't any of his business. It should be up to Pastor Dan, or even Bailey, to explain to Lacey Gould that God wasn't expecting her to earn forgiveness through good works.

"What song do we sing first?" Lacey asked from across the room. The sweet-faced older lady had her arm through Lacey's.

Jay lifted his guitar and shrugged. He grimaced at the jab of pain in his lower back and Lacey grinned, because she knew that a bull had dumped him hard the night before.

"'In the Garden'?" He didn't need music for that one.

Lacey knew it; she was nodding and turning the pages of the hymnal. Her elderly friend clapped and smiled, saying it was one of her favorites, and then her eyes grew misty.

"My husband is there waiting for me in that garden." She said it in such a soft and wavering voice that Jay barely heard. He did see tears shimmering in Lacey's eyes, from compassion, always compassion. He wondered if she felt the emotions of everyone she met.

Lacey held the woman's hand and as Jay started to play, Lacey led the song, her voice alto and clear, the meaning of the words clearly written on her face. The wavering voice of her friend joined in, sweet and soprano.

Jay stumbled over the chords and caught up. Next to him, Bailey giggled, the way she'd done on the bus years ago. He was glad she was still getting enjoyment out of his life. He'd been gone nearly eight years, working on the Springfield PD, and it felt as if he'd never left.

Over the next thirty minutes, he found firm footing again. He forgot Lacey and concentrated on the music as the people gathered in the circle around them. He had missed Gibson. He had missed these people, some of whom he had known all of his life. The gentleman to his left had been his high school principal. One of the ladies had lived down the road from his family.

Most of the kids from Gibson had moved to the city or left the state. So many of the people in the nursing home were without close family these days, and this touch from their church made the difference.

Lacey made the difference, he realized. With her flashy smile and soft laughter, her teasing comments and warm hugs, she made a difference that he hadn't expected.

In the lives of these people.

"Not interested, huh?" Bailey teased as they finished up and he was putting his guitar away.

"Interested in what? Helping with this ministry? Of course I am."

"In Lacey."

"Go away, Bailey. You're starting to be a fifth-grade pest."

"Write her a note and ask her out."

"You stink at matchmaking. Matchmakers are supposed to be sneaky, a little underhanded."

Bailey laughed, her eyes watering. "Oh, thank you, now that I know the finer points of the art, I'll do better next time. Maybe you should learn the fine art of realizing when a woman is perfect for you."

"That's obviously a lesson I never learned." He closed the case on his guitar. He saw Lacey walk out as if she had somewhere to be. "Bailey, I'm not interested. I really thought I'd found the right woman, and I dated her for three years only to find out she wasn't interested in a cowboy. So if you don't mind, I'm on vacation from romance and I'm boycotting matchmakers."

Bailey's laughter faded, so did her smile. "She didn't hurt you, Jay. You're still thinking about Jamie. Maybe it's time to let her go?"

Gut-stomped in the worst way, by a woman with a soft smile. He smiled down at Bailey, happy for her, and sorry that she knew all of his secrets.

"I'm trying, Bay. I really am. I guess that's why I decided to come home. Because I have to face it here, and I have to deal with it."

"I'm sorry, Jay. I thought that enough time had gone by and I was hoping you were ready to move on."

"You were wrong." He smiled to soften the words, because Bailey had been a friend his entire life. A pest, but a friend.

"So, you've given up on love?"

"For now. I want to build my house and get settled back into my life here. I'll be thirty this winter and maybe I'm just going to be a settled old bachelor, raising my horses and doing a little singing for church."

"What a nice dream." She patted his arm, not the slap on the back that Cody had given him the night before. She was getting all maternal. "See you later."

He nodded and picked up his guitar. When he walked out the front entrance of the nursing home, it was hot, unbearably hot. He pulled sunglasses out of his pocket and slid them on as he walked across the parking lot. The sound of an engine cranking, not firing, caught his attention.

Of course it would be Lacey. They were the only ones left and she was sitting in her car with the driver's side door open.

Jay put his guitar in the front of his truck and walked over to her car. "Won't start?"

"Nope." She tried again. "It always starts. Why won't it start now?"

He shrugged. Probably Bailey did something to it, something less conspicuous than just telling him he should ask Lacey out. He smiled at the thought, because he could picture Bailey out here removing the coil wire from Lacey's car. But she wouldn't do that. He didn't think she would.

"Pop the hood and I'll take a look."

She did and he walked to the front of the car to push the hood up. The coil wire was there. He smiled. Nothing looked out of place.

"Lacey, it isn't out of gas, is it?" He peeked around the raised hood at her.

"I don't think so." And then she groaned. "First the mower and now this."

"I'll drive you home and we'll come back later with gas."

"I can't believe I did that." She got out of the car and closed the door. "I always make sure it has gas."

"Not today."

She shook her head. "I'm not sure what's wrong with me."

"You have a lot going on in your life." He opened the passenger-side door of his truck. "Maybe having today off will help."

"Maybe."

Jay closed the door and walked around to the driver's side with a quick look up, wondering what God was thinking. He got in and started his truck. Lacey kept her face turned, staring out the passenger-side window.

He wondered if she was crying.

* * *

The front door of the house was open. Lacey sat in Jay's truck, her stomach tightening, because it didn't look right. She glanced at Jay, who had remained silent during the drive home. She hadn't had much to say, either.

What did you say to a stranger whose life you felt like you were invading?

"Do you always leave the front door of the house open?" He turned off the truck.

"Of course I don't. Something's wrong." She reached for the door handle and started to get out of the truck.

Jay's hand on her arm stopped her. "No, let me go in first."

"Don't say that." Her skin prickled with cold heat. "Don't say it like something has happened."

"Nothing has happened, but we're not taking chances."

She nodded, swallowing past the lump that lodged between her heart and her throat. Jay got out of the truck and walked up to the house. He eased up to the front door and looked inside. Then he stepped through the opening into the dark house.

Lacey waited, her heart pounding, thudding in her chest. She should have known that something like this would happen. Whatever *this* was. She didn't even know, but she knew without a doubt that something was wrong.

Jay walked back onto the porch and shook his head. He motioned her out of the truck. Lacey grabbed her Bible and got out. She walked to the front porch, not wanting to hear what she knew he would tell her.

"There's no one in here."

"Maybe she went for a walk. Or she might have gone to use your phone." Grasping, she knew she was grasping at straws.

And Jay was just being the nice guy that he was by staying, by not making accusations.

"That's possible," he finally said.

"She might have left a note, telling me where she went."

"Okay. We can look." But he didn't believe it. Lacey didn't know why that hurt, but it did. Because it felt like he didn't believe her, or trust her. She was an extension of Corry, because they had come from the same place.

She walked into the house and he followed, slower, taking more time. "I knew I should have made her go to church."

"You can't force someone."

"I know, but if I had, she'd be here and Rachel would be safe."

Lacey wouldn't feel so frantic, like some unseen clock was ticking, telling her she was nearly out of time. And she didn't know why, or what would happen when the time ran out.

"Lacey." He stood in front of the desk where she kept her bills and other paperwork. "You know she has a record, right?"

Lacey turned, and he was watching her, pretending it was a normal question. "I do know."

She wanted to ask him if he knew that *she* had a record. Did he know what she had done to put food on the table, to pay the rent to keep the roof over her younger siblings' heads? She looked away, because she didn't really want answers to those questions from him.

It was too much information, and it would let him too far into her life, and leave her open to whatever look might be in his eyes.

It might be too much like the look in Lance's eyes when he'd said he could love her no matter what. With Jay it was different; they hadn't stepped into each other's lives that way. He just happened to be here with her now.

"Lacey, do you know who she's been in contact with?"

"No." She stood in the doorway of Corry's room. The bedding was flung across the bed and dragged on the floor, and a few odds and ends of clothing were still scattered about.

Jay walked into the room, an envelope in his hand.

"She's gone. This was on the table." He handed her an envelope.

Lacey's fingers trembled as she took it from him. She ripped it and tore the paper out. Eyes watering, she read the scribbled lines, trying to make sense of misspelled words and her sister's childlike handwriting. But she got it. She crumpled the note in her hand. She got it.

"She's gone." She held out the note and Jay took it from her hand.

"Let's take a drive and see if we can find her. She couldn't have gotten far."

Optimism. Lacey had worked hard on being an optimist. She had worked hard on finding faith in hard times. She didn't know what to think about Corry leaving with the baby.

She glanced at her watch. "Jay, if they left right after I left, they could be back in St. Louis by now."

He inhaled and let it out in a sigh. "That's true. Let's go inside and we'll see if she left anything behind."

"We should call the police."

Dark brows lifted and he sort of smiled at her. "Lacey, I am the police. And unless she's committed a crime, there's no reason for going after her. She's a grown woman who left your house with her own child."

"But she can't take care of Rachel. She can barely take care of herself."

"She's an adult."

"An adult who reads and writes at a first-grade level." Lacey looked away from his compassion, his sympathy.

"Can she take care of Rachel?"

Lacey walked through the dark, cool interior of the house, her house. She kept her eyes down, thinking of what to do next. She couldn't face the empty bassinet or thoughts of Rachel with Corry.

"She can, but I don't know if she can keep her safe." Lacey spoke softly, because if she said it too loudly, would it seem harsh? "My mother and Corry make a lot of bad decisions."

"We could hotline her with family services and maybe they could intervene on behalf of the baby." Jay walked through the kitchen. He stopped at the canisters.

"What do you keep in these?"

"Sugar, flour, coffee. Normal stuff. Why?"

"This one is empty and the lid was next to it." He lifted the smallest canister.

The air left her lungs and the room felt too hot, and then too cold. Never in a million years would she have thought…

But then again, she should have. Because she knew Corry, knew what she was capable of. She was capable of stealing from her own family.

"It wasn't coffee?" He set the canister down and replaced the lid. "Money?"

Her chest ached and her throat tightened. "I can't believe I was so stupid."

She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't be the person he pitied. She had survived worse than this, and she would survive again.

"You aren't stupid."

"I should have put it in the bank." She shook her head, looking away from Jay so she wouldn't see his compassion and he couldn't see her tears. "I put my tip money in there, and lived on my hourly wages. It was for land."

"For land?" Soft and tender, his voice soothed. He took a few steps in her direction, and she wanted to rely on the strong arms of a cowboy to hold her and tell her everything would be okay.

He wasn't offering, and she knew better.

"Yes, for land. I want a place of my own." Dreams, snatched away. "But I can start over, right? It isn't the end of the world."

"No." He stood in front of her now, tall and cowboy, with eyes that seemed to understand. "It isn't the end of the world, but it probably feels like it is."

"It feels more like I might never see my niece again. Rachel is more important than land. I don't want that baby to live the life we lived in St. Louis. I want her to have a real family and real chances."

"She'll be okay with her mother."

"No, she won't. Jay, you don't get it. You've lived here all your life, in a cocoon that sheltered you from the outside world. You don't know what it's like to always worry about who's walking through the front door and what they're going to do to you."

The words spilled out and so did the tears, coursing down her cheeks, salty on her lips. She brushed them away with her hand and shook her head when he tried to hold her.

"Don't look at me like that," she whispered, staring at the floor because she couldn't look him in the eyes. "I don't want to be someone you feel sorry for. I'd much rather you resent me for being here."

"I don't resent you."

She smiled then and wiped at her eyes. "You do, but it's nice of you to say you don't. Look, I'm fine. I survived and I have a great life here. And if you keep looking at me like that, you're going to make me cry again. I don't want to cry anymore."

"We'll find Rachel." He made it sound like a promise she could believe. She'd been promised a lot in her life.

"I hope so."

"Lacey, growing up in Gibson doesn't guarantee anything." He walked to the door. "Let's see if we can find your sister and the baby. At least now we have a reason to call the police."

The stolen money. Lacey picked up her purse and followed him out the door, still hurting over what Corry had done, and ashamed because she knew that life held no guarantees for anyone.

Not even for Jay Blackhorse.

Chapter Seven



Jay cruised past the church on Tuesday afternoon. He'd been past a couple of other times, and each time, Lacey's car had been parked out front. It was still parked out front. Maybe she'd heard from her sister.

Probably not. He didn't expect Corry to suddenly have a conscience and feel guilty for what she'd done to Lacey. He pulled into the church parking lot and parked. But he didn't get out.

Instead, he questioned why he was there. He asked God, but didn't hear a clear answer. It felt a lot like getting involved in Lacey's life, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. He didn't want involved, he didn't want tangled up. He didn't want to understand her life in St. Louis and what she'd done there.

Pastor Dan walked out of the front of the church, taking the steps two at a time, because that was just Dan. He was always in a hurry to get somewhere. And he was always smiling. Dan had a lot of joy. Joy was as contagious as someone's bad mood, but a lot easier to take. Jay got out of his truck and waited.

"Got business, or are you just here to pass the time?" Dan stopped, still smiling, but with a curious glint in his eyes.

"Passing time." Jay reached into the truck and pulled out two plastic bags with Styrofoam containers. "I doubt she's eaten anything."

And that was the entangled part that he hadn't wanted. He'd noticed her car at the church for the last few hours, and he'd started to think that maybe she hadn't eaten. She wasn't his problem, but his mom had made her their problem. On her way out of town, Wilma had even called and asked him to make sure Lacey was okay.

"I don't think she's eaten since Sunday," Dan admitted. "She's done a lot of praying, though. I would guess that most of it's for other people, not herself. Sometimes life is that way, we can't see the trees for the forest."

Jay pushed the truck door closed. "I'm not sure I'm catching what you mean."

"It's simple, Jay. We look at life, at things that go wrong, and we just see things that went wrong, that didn't go our way. And sometimes they went wrong for the right reason, because God has a better plan."

Jay smiled. "I got dumped for a reason that I don't yet understand."

"Bingo." Pastor Dan gave him a hearty slap on the back. "You'll find Lacey in the youth room. She's mopping, so don't step on the floor. It really irks her if you step on her wet floor."

"Does she work here every week?"

"She volunteers. Our cleaning lady moved and Lacey considers this one of her ministries."

"Has anyone bothered to tell her that God doesn't require works?" He sighed, because he hadn't meant to say the words.

Pastor Dan only laughed. "It isn't about works. It's about love and the works grow from that love, and from her faith. You know that, Jay. When you've gone through what Lacey has gone through, you're a little more appreciative of a new life."

"Maybe so."

"Get that meal in there before it gets cold." Dan nodded to the bags. "Oh, any news on Corry?"

"None."

Pastor Dan shook his head. "I hate that for her."

Jay nodded and headed on up the sidewalk, carrying the meals that were still warm, and telling himself that he was doing what his mom would want him to do. He was taking care of Lacey.

He found Lacey standing in the hall outside the youth room, her hair in a dark auburn ponytail. Her skin glowed, glistening with perspiration.

She turned and smiled at him, the smile hesitant. “Have they found her?”

He shook his head, not surprised by the question. Of course her thoughts were focused on Rachel and Corry. He lifted the bags of food.

“You should eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I am, and I don’t like to eat alone.” He handed her one of the bags. “We could sit outside.”

“Shouldn’t you be at home?”

“My mom is staying in Springfield for a few days. Dad has a pretty serious workload this week and can’t make it home, so she’s with him.”

“You have chores to do at home.”

“I’ll do them when I get there.” He nodded toward the door, amazed that it took so much convincing to get one woman to sit and eat with him. That was a pretty harsh blow to his ego and he’d never thought of himself as prideful.

“People will talk.” She continued her objections, but she followed him out the side door to the playground and the pavilion.

“Talk about what?”

“You know, they’ll talk about us. I promise you, that isn’t what you want.”

He sat down on the top of the picnic table and she sat next to him. “It might not be what you want.”

She opened the plastic bag and pulled out the container. She lifted the lid and smiled at the club sandwich and fries. “I promise you, Jay, being seen with you could only be good for me. And thank you for this. You either made a good guess, or Jolynn made the sandwich.”

“Jolynn.” He opened his container. “I asked her what you liked.”

She groaned and he glanced sideways. She looked heavenward and shook her head. “Jolynn, she’s the main contributor to the rumor mill, bless her heart.”

“We’ll deal with it.” He didn’t want to deal with it. Lacey squirted mayo on her plate and dipped a corner of her sandwich into it before she took a bite. He pulled the onions off his burger.

“Thank you for the sandwich.” She spoke after a few minutes. Jay nodded. The quiet between them had been nice. He didn’t really want to admit it, not even to himself, but she was easy to be around.

“You’re welcome. Tell me something, Lacey, why and how do you do it all?”

“Do it all?”

“Work doubles, go to school.” He shrugged. “You’re going to school, right?”

“I never graduated from high school.” She turned a little pink and took another bite of sandwich.

“Okay, work, school, church, the nursing home, cleaning and nursery. Why?”

“Because I…” She looked away, the summer breeze picking up dark hair that had come loose from her ponytail. She brushed it back with nails that were painted dark pink but were chipping at the ends.

She smiled at him. “Because it makes me feel good to be a part of this community.”

He didn’t buy it.

“I’ve always tried too hard, too,” he admitted. “It isn’t easy, being a Blackhorse and knowing people expect a lot from you.”

She choked on her last bite of sandwich. As she gasped for air, he handed her a clean napkin. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’m not trying to do anything.”

"Okay." But she was.

He sighed and let it go, because he couldn't explain what Lacey didn't want to hear. They were fighting a battle that had already been fought and paying for sins that were already paid for. They were forgetting the grace that covered a multitude of sins.

"Jay, if you want to say something, say it. I'm really tired and not in the mood for games." She looked at him like he really had just fallen off the turnip truck. "What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

"That you don't have to work so hard to be accepted, or worry that God will kick you out of His house."

Her eyes widened and she moved away from him, picking up her empty Styrofoam as she went. "You do know."

"Lacey, that isn't…"

She lifted a hand, a hand that shook. "I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear what you think of my life or what I've done, or how it was okay. You don't know how I feel."

No, he didn't. He shook his head and she walked away.

* * *

Bailey answered the door on the third knock. She opened the door, eyes a little sleepy and blond hair wispy. Lacey shoved trembling hands into her pockets.

"You were sleeping."

"No, I wasn't." Bailey yawned, proof that she had been asleep. "Come in, I could use company."

"Good, because I'm looking for a place to hide."

"You've come to the right place. I'm here alone. Cody and our little angel went to a horse auction in Tulsa. They won't be back until tomorrow."

"I don't really want to fall apart in front of Cody and Meg."

"You, fall apart?" Bailey motioned her into the house that she and Cody had built earlier in the spring. They had just moved in last month.

"Me, fall apart, never." Lacey followed her friend into the kitchen and pulled out a bar stool at the island.

"Have they found Corry and Rachel?"

Lacey shook her head. She wrapped her hands around the glass of iced tea that Bailey put on the counter before she sat down across from Lacey.

"Well?"

"Jay knows."

"Knows where they are?"

"Knows about me." She slid her hands up the glass and they came away wet and cold from condensation. "I guess I knew, but I wanted to believe that only the people I wanted to tell would know."

"He won't tell anyone."

"I know he won't." Or did she? She could only remember the look on Lance's face when he learned the truth. He had been shocked and disgusted. Jay had shown pity.

She wanted to cry, because the past couldn't be undone. What she had done couldn't be forgotten. It was in black and white, for anyone to find. She had been arrested for prostitution. It had felt dirty then, and it still felt dirty.

"God forgives, Bailey, I know that. But forgetting and forgiving myself is the real trick. People are so quick to judge, and to walk away. Everyone thinks they know the story and how to fix it."

"I know." Bailey shrugged slim shoulders. "Okay, I don't know. But in a way, I do. I came home from Wyoming pregnant. It wasn't easy, and it obviously couldn't be hidden."

Lacey nodded, because she had met Bailey when Meg was just a baby. The two had become friends because they'd both felt a little lost and alone that first year of Meg's life, and the first year of Lacey's life in Gibson.

"I don't want Jay to look at me the way Lance looked at me."

"He's a different person."

"True, we're not dating and he doesn't feel like I've kept something from him. I should have been honest with Lance from the beginning."

"Maybe, but if he'd loved you, he would have taken time to understand. Just remember, Jay and Lance are two different people."

Lacey smiled, and it wasn't hard to do, not with her best friend sitting next to her. "You can give up the matchmaking, my friend. I'm not going to be the dirty sock in the Blackhorse family's clean sock drawer."

"That's the most absurd statement."

"I like a touch of absurdity from time to time. But you have to admit, it's a fitting analogy."

"It's not. And because you made such a ridiculous statement, you have to make us a salad."

"Bailey, can I really stay in Gibson if everyone finds out the truth?" Lacey looked at her friend, hoping for answers. The thought of leaving left a wound in her heart because this town really was home.

"You can't leave, Lacey. What would we do without you?"

"Make your own salad?"

"See, I'd be lost without you in my life."

Lacey hugged her friend and then hopped down from the stool. "I'll make your salad, but you have to make ranch dressing. That's what friends do for each other."

Her cell phone buzzed. Lacey pulled it out of her pocket and groaned. "It's Jay."

"Answer it."

"I don't want to talk to him. He can leave a voice mail."

Bailey grabbed the phone and flipped it open. "Hi, Jay."

She talked for a minute and then handed the phone to Lacey. She wasn't smiling, and Lacey's heart sank with dread.

"Jay?"

"Lacey, Corry is in Springfield."

"Okay. Where in Springfield? What about Rachel? Are they okay?"

"I'm afraid that's all the news that I have. They haven't caught them."

"Caught them?" She took shallow breaths and sat back down on the stool. "What does that mean?"

"She and her boyfriend robbed a convenience store. Lacey, they had a gun."

"Rachel?"

"I'm sure she's still with them."

Lacey closed her eyes, fighting fear, fighting thoughts that told her that Rachel would be hurt, or worse. She didn't want to think about what this meant for her sister. "They don't know for sure?"

"They don't. Do you want me to come and get you? If you can't drive, I can come over there."

She could drive, of course she could. Her hands shook and she didn't want to think, to let it sink in.

"I can drive myself home. Will you call if you hear something?"

"You know I will."

"Okay." She sobbed a little, not wanting him to hear. "Jay, thank you."

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry."

She closed her phone and slipped it into her pocket. Bailey's hand was on her shoulder. "It'll be okay."

"I don't know how."

"Let Jay drive you home." Bailey sat down across from her, their salads forgotten.

"No, I'm fine. You need to eat. Little Cody Junior can't go without food."

"I'll eat, but you need to let friends help you through this. Lacey, you've always been there for me. Let me be here for you. Let Jay be a friend."

Jay, a friend? It felt like a mismatched shoe. It didn't fit. It was a little tight. A little uncomfortable.

* * *

Jay hung up from the call to Lacey and concentrated on driving, on not getting distracted. As he pulled up to the barn, he noticed his parents on the porch. They were home. He hadn't expected that.

His dad greeted him as he got out of the truck.

"I wondered if you were coming home any time soon." Bill Blackhorse smiled and winked, talking the way they had talked to one another a dozen years ago.

"Did you think I would pull a stunt and miss curfew?" Jay smiled back.

"Nah, not really. But as we came through town we saw your truck and Lacey's car at the church."

"I was just doing what Mom asked, making sure Lacey was okay."

"Lacey is a wonderful young woman."

So that's the way this was going. Not that Jay was surprised. His dad had introduced him to Cindy, too.

"Dad, we're neighbors, maybe friends, nothing more."

His dad patted him on the back and they walked into the barn together. "Jay, it's okay to fall in love again."

"Is it, Dad?" Jay pulled his saddle out of the tack room. "I need to work that black mare."

"Working the black mare isn't going to undo what's happening to you. You're letting go. I guess maybe you feel guilty."

Jay shrugged. He faced his dad, and it wasn't comfortable. He wanted to let it go, the way they'd been letting it go for years now.

"Dad, I can't forget Jamie. I can't forget that I loved her."

"No one said you had to forget. But let someone else in. That's all I'm saying."

Jay walked out the back of the barn. At the gate he whistled and the horses, ten of them grazing a few hundred feet away, turned to look at him. A few went back to grazing. He whistled again and they headed in his direction.

"What you're saying is that I should let Lacey in." Jay smiled, glancing at his dad in time to catch a shrug and a little bit of a sheepish look. "Dad, you can't push us together. From what I hear, Lacey is still getting over Lance. I still have a wedding ring in my dresser drawer."

"I'm asking you to pray." Bill reached out to pet his favorite gray mare. "I'm asking you to let God heal your heart. Maybe that's why you came home. Time to face what happened and move forward."

"I think I am moving forward." Time to let go of the girl he loved? He didn't know if he could.

The black mare, Duckie, a strange name for a horse, was at the fence. Jay slid the halter over her head and clipped on the lead rope.

His dad opened the gate and Jay led the mare through, moving fast to keep the other horses from following. Bill closed the gate behind him. A car door closed. Jay led the horse to the barn and tied her.

Lacey walked through the doors, her face a dark silhouette with the setting sun behind her. He heard his dad behind him.

"I'm going to the house." Bill patted him on the shoulder as he walked away, greeting Lacey with a hug.

"I'm sorry. I should have called." Lacey looked a little lost, like she wasn't sure. She stood a few feet from him, from the mare. "She's beautiful."

"You don't have to call." He looked over the mare's neck at the woman leaning against the wall. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. I was on my way home from Bailey's and I realized I really didn't want to go home. There's no one there."

"The police will find her, Lacey."

"And take her to jail."

"They won't take Rachel to jail."

She reached to slide her hand down the neck of the mare. Jay slid the saddle pad into place and then lowered the saddle onto the mare's back. The mare turned to look at him, but she stood still.

"Do you want to ride her?" He tightened the girth strap and knotted it.

"Could I?"

"I think so. I'll show you how to rope."

"No way!"

He smiled and it felt really good. "Yeah way!"

"I'd love it."

It would keep both of their minds off what they didn't want to think about. He didn't want to think about letting go of Jamie. She didn't want to think about her little sister going to jail.

"Come on, we'll take her out to the arena." He led the horse and Lacey walked a short distance away. "You do know how to ride, right?"

"Of course. You can't live around here for six years and not know how to ride."

He laughed because she bristled like an angry cat.

"Let me ride her first and then she's all yours."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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