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CLASSICS

BRENDA MINTON
His Little Cowgirl
&
A Cowboy's Heart



Two heartwarming novels of love, family and rodeos by bestselling author Brenda Minton

HIS LITTLE COWGIRL

Six years ago, cowboy Cody Jacobs left behind the woman he loved. Now he's come to make amends—only to discover the daughter he didn't know about. Can single mother Bailey Cross trust him with their child's heart—and her own?

A COWBOY'S HEART

Former rodeo star Clint Cameron is used to taking care of everyone. His family, friends and especially his twin four-year-old nephews. Yet his stubborn, beautiful neighbor, Willow Michaels, keeps pushing him away. She's hesitant to trust him, but Clint is not about to let her walk away.

Praise for Brenda Minton and her novels

“Minton maintains great chemistry between her leads.”
—*RT Book Reviews*

“Minton’s characters are well crafted.”
—*RT Book Reviews*

“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*

“This wonderful romance has good characters and a great story.”
—*RT Book Reviews on The Cowboy Next Door*

BRENDA MINTON

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&
A Cowboy's Heart*

 **HARLEQUIN**[®] LOVE INSPIRED[®] CLASSICS

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BRENDA MINTON

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

HIS LITTLE COWGIRL

*And ye be kind one to another,
tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

—Ephesians 4:32

This book is dedicated to

Doug, for always supporting me in my dreams, and to my kids for allowing me to be the “crazy mom.” Dream big and never give up.

To all of my family and friends who have kept me going forward when I wanted to quit.

To Janet Benrey and Melissa Endlich, for everything they do and have done for me.

To Janet McCoy of McCoy Ranches, for taking the time to answer my questions about bull riders and bull riding. (Mistakes I’ve made are of course my own.) To bull riders like Cord McCoy, who are an inspiration and a role model to young people, and who leave their own footprints of faith.

To the readers for reading.

To God for all of the blessings.

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Chapter One

Bailey stuck her hands into the hot, soapy water and began to scrub the dishes she'd put off washing until after lunch, wishing for the umpteenth time that the dishwasher still worked. Her father had helped for a few minutes, until his legs had grown weak and he'd taken himself to the living room and his favorite recliner to watch *Oprah*.

The throaty snore she heard through the doorway told her that he'd fallen asleep. She didn't mind, it was sleep that he needed these days. At least when he was sleeping, he wasn't worrying.

Oprah's voice drifted into the kitchen, borne on the gentle breeze that blew through the house. "So tell me, Suzanne, how much did you pay for your home in Malibu?"

Bailey strained to listen. "Three million, a bargain." Audience laughter.

Bailey shook her head and scrubbed harder. Three million for a house. What couldn't she do with three million dollars? She looked out her window above the sink, at the farm shimmering in the late-afternoon sun. It looked as tired as her dad. A good eye could see that things were falling apart. The fences were sagging and the last windstorm had done a number on the barn roof. Not to mention her truck, which was on its last leg, and tires.... Three million dollars. That would help pay the mortgage. Well, of course, with three million dollars in the bank, there wouldn't be a mortgage.

She was doing well if she made the mortgage payment each month. The tips she earned as a waitress put shoes on her daughter's feet—one pair at a time—and cutting a few more cows from the herd would pay the property taxes. Life in the Ozarks was far removed from Hollywood.

A little cutting back, a lot of prayer and making it through another day with her dad still in her life. That was how it went in the real world. At least in her world.

Bailey squeezed her eyes shut. She opened them when she heard a distant rattle and the rapid-fire bark of her blue heeler. Her mind turned, wondering who it could be. She wasn't expecting anyone, and it sounded like whoever it was, they were pulling a trailer.

She squeezed the water out of the dishrag, tossed it on the counter and walked out the back door. If she didn't catch the dog now, the person paying them a surprise visit would have a hole in his pant's leg and a bad attitude to go with it. Bailey was holding on to faith by a string; she didn't need someone's bad day to rub off on her.

A shiny, red extended-cab truck pulling an RV rumbled to a stop. Blue, her five-year-old blue heeler, stood in the middle of the yard. The yard that really needed to be mowed before it became a hayfield.

But Bailey stopped herself there and reached for the dog's collar. She had a list of things that needed to be done. All of those things dimmed in comparison with the bigger problem she saw stepping out of the truck and into her life.

The hair on the back of Blue's neck was standing on end. Teeth bared, the dog strained against her hold on his collar. For a brief, really brief, moment, she considered letting go.

Six years had passed since she'd seen Cody Jacobs face-to-face. Six years since she'd spent a summer working on a ranch in Wyoming. Six years since she'd tried so hard to tell him she was pregnant. Six years since she'd given up because he wouldn't answer her phone calls.

Now he was here. Now, when there were so many other worries to work through. She looked up to see if God would send her a sign, a parting of the clouds or some other gigantic miracle. Instead she felt a soft whisper of peace. If only it hadn't gotten tangled with dread and a good dose of anger as he

day went suddenly south.

Cody walked across the lawn, looking for all the world like he belonged on her farm. He was suntanned, wore faded Wranglers, and a soft, cotton T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. He was smiling like he hadn't a care in the world.

Every time she had imagined this moment, she'd thought what she'd say. She'd be strong, send him packing, show him she was in control and that he couldn't hurt her again.

Not once had she been breathless or speechless. Not once in her imagination had she thought that she'd remember how his laughter sounded on a quiet summer night in Wyoming, or how his hand had felt on hers. She had told herself that she'd only remember him saying goodbye and how he laughed when she told him she loved him.

All of her imaginings melted like a snowman in July when faced with the genuine article—Cody Jacobs walking toward her. Now what in the world was she going to do about that? What was she going to do about the little girl inside the house, and the truth that she'd kept from him? All of her good intentions—wanting to protect her daughter from someone whose lifestyle had seemed unfit for a child—seemed irrelevant at the moment.

Cody Jacobs was about to learn he had a daughter. She hadn't wanted it to happen like this. Meg knew who her daddy was. Bailey had wanted to confront Cody in her own way, when the time seemed right.

Not today.

Blue yanked at the collar and jerked her forward a few feet, a warning that her visitor had entered the imaginary danger zone of the dog. Bailey flexed her fingers and wished she wasn't leaning forward the way she was.

“Bailey, you're looking good.”

Her foot she was looking good. She was wearing the same faded jeans and stained T-shirt she'd worn while working in the garden.

“Thanks, Cody.”

Still smiling, he held his hand out to Blue. The dog suddenly forgot that the man was the enemy. Pulling free from her grasp, the animal belly crawled to Cody. Bailey stood, stretching the kink from her back. Her gaze connected with Cody's, really connected for the first time since he'd gotten out of the truck.

Up close and in person he was still about the prettiest man she'd ever seen. Like the average bull rider, he wasn't tall, just a few inches taller than her five feet five inches. He still had lean, boyish looks and long eyelashes that could make a girl swoon—if she were the swooning type. Bailey wasn't not anymore.

“How've you been?” He closed the gap between them, his hand still being licked by Blue.

“I'm fine.” Most days she really was. “What are you doing in Missouri?”

She knew the answer. She was a convenient stop on the highway to Springfield, just thirty miles north. The town was hosting a pro bull-riding event, and Cody was in line for the world title this year.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay, talk.”

Looking suddenly unsure, he took off his bent-out-of-shape, straw cowboy hat and shoved his fingers through black hair, which was straight and a little too long. When he looked at her, with his stormy blue-gray eyes, she thought of Meg and how she didn't want Cody to learn the truth without any warning.

Her heart shuddered at the thought. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she breathed a sigh of

relief. Meg was taking a nap on the couch. That gave Bailey a few minutes to decide the best course of action.

“Bailey, I’m here to say I’m sorry.” Cody shrugged and said, “I guess this is part of a man turned thirty and realizing he’s wasted a lot of years and hurt a lot of people.”

“I’m not sure what to say.” The words of his apology were much as she had imagined them to be, but in her dreams they made more sense. In real life his words didn’t bring instant healing.

“You don’t really have to say anything. This is something I have to do. I...” He cleared his throat and brought his gaze up to meet hers. “I joined AA and part of the process is making amends for the things I’ve done. I know that when I drove away from Bar A Ranch, I hurt you.”

“So is this about wanting forgiveness, or are you truly sorry?”

She needed more than words because words were easy enough to say. Words promised forever and something special on a summer night.

Words said *I’m sorry* and even *I forgive*.

Cody worried the hat in his hands, keeping his head down and his gaze on his dusty boots. When he looked up, his eyes were clear, his jaw set and determined. She had seen that look on his face before, normally with a camera focused in tightly as he gave the nod and the bull he was set to ride busted from the gate for an eight-second ride that always seemed to last eight minutes.

“This is about me needing forgiveness, and it is also about being truly sorry.”

It was her turn to look up, to search for something in his gaze, in those eyes that reminded her of a summer storm on the horizon. He meant it, or at least she thought he did. She nodded and took a step back.

“Okay, you’re forgiven.”

“You mean it?”

Did she mean it? She closed her eyes, wanting him to be gone, wanting to walk back into the house to a sink full of dishes and chores waiting to be done. Those were the things that made sense to her these days.

What also made sense was Meg, and the life they had here, the life they had built for themselves in spite of everything. Bailey had paced the floor alone when her daughter had been colicky. Bailey, alone, had held Meg tightly when a bad dream woke her in the middle of the night.

Cody hadn’t been there, not even for that stormy night when Bailey’s dad had driven her to the hospital.

Her conscience poked at her, telling her that he couldn’t apologize for the things he didn’t know. Cody couldn’t apologize for leaving her to raise a child alone, not when he’d never known about that child. They’d both made mistakes. He didn’t know it, but they both had apologies to make.

“I forgave you a long time ago.” She smiled, feeling the heat of the August sun on her head and back.

“That means a lot to me, Bailey. I want a fresh start, and I didn’t want to make that start thinking about you and what happened.”

What happened—the way he said it made it sound simple and easy to forget. It wasn’t easy to forgive a decision that made a person feel like she’d let down not only herself, but everyone who counted on her. Even God.

Maybe Cody was finally starting to understand.

“That’s good, Cody. I hope that this is the change you need.” She paused, unsure of how to proceed. She should tell him about Meg. Before he left she should let him know what she had tried to tell him the last time she saw him.

The screen door thudded softly behind her. Bailey lifted her gaze to his, fearing the truth and the look on Cody's face. He stared past her, his eyes narrowing against the bright sunshine. As his gaze lingered, Bailey knew that the time for truth had arrived.

It had never happened this way in her dreams.

"Mommy."

* * *

Cody stared at the little girl standing on the porch. He tried to catch his breath, but the weight on his chest pushed down, forcing air from his lungs as his heart hammered against his ribs. He stared into a tiny heart-shaped face he'd never seen before, and yet, and yet, the face seemed so familiar.

The little girl had Bailey's straight blond hair. She had a rosebud mouth, just like her mom's. His gaze stopped at her eyes. It was there that he discovered the truth and he knew that Bailey had apologies of her own to give.

Six years of traveling, riding bulls and putting money in the bank for a place of his own, a place he wouldn't let his own dad buy for him, and it came down to this. It came down to a child with stormy-blue eyes wearing jean shorts, a T-shirt and pink cowboy boots.

Cody felt a huge dose of regret because while he'd been having the time of his life, Bailey had been here raising his daughter alone.

With a million questions and plenty of accusations racing through his mind, he switched his attention back to Bailey. She twisted away from him but not quickly enough for him to miss the stream of red creeping up her neck.

Cowgirls couldn't lie.

"Go inside, Meg," Bailey said.

"But I need a drink."

"Get a juice box out of the fridge. I'll be in soon."

"Who is he?" The little girl crossed her tanned arms and gave him the look that said she was the only law in town and he was trespassing. He wanted to smile but he couldn't. Not yet.

"He's someone I used to know."

The little girl nodded and walked back into the house, the screen door slamming behind her. Bailey waited until her daughter, his daughter, too, was out of sight before facing him.

"It looks like I'm not the only one who needs to apologize," he whispered, not really sure if he could say the words aloud.

He had a daughter. He was six months sober, living in an RV, and he had a daughter.

He was on step 9, and it seemed that Bailey had a Step 9 of her own. Making amends.

"I tried to tell you." She looked away, the breeze blowing her hair around her face. He remembered the feel of her hair, like soft silk and feathers.

He remembered that being with her had made him believe in himself. For a few short months he had believed he could be something better than his own father had been. Now he couldn't find that feeling, not with anger boiling to the surface.

"You didn't try very hard."

"The day you left the ranch, I told you that I loved you and that we needed to talk. You laughed and walked away because, and I quote, '*Cowgirls always think they're in love.*'"

As she faced him with his own stupid actions, it was his turn to look away. He focused on the same tree-covered hill her gaze had shot to moments ago. Without really trying, he remembered that day.

He remembered getting in his truck and driving away, with her running out of the barn trying to stop him.

He remembered thinking that if he didn't get away, he would drown in her. More memories returned, along with the knowledge that he had wanted to lose himself in that feeling. That had scared him more than anything. At twenty-five he'd been too afraid of love to take a chance. He'd been afraid of failure.

Now he had a daughter. He was in the middle of a program that included not starting new relationships, and this one had to be taken care of. He had a little girl. He needed to wrap his mind around that fact and what it meant, not just for the moment but for the rest of his life.

"I should have listened to you." He ran his hand through his hair and shoved his hat back in place. "But you could have told me. You've had six years of opportunities to tell me."

"I left messages for you to call me. After a while I gave up. Wouldn't you?" She crossed her arms, staring him down with brown eyes that at one time were warmer than cocoa on a winter day. "You were running so fast, Cody. You didn't want to hear what I had to tell you because you were afraid it would be about love and forever."

"You should have told me."

"And have you believing that I was trying to trap you? The day you left Wyoming you made it pretty clear to me that you weren't looking for 'forever' with anyone."

He needed to sit down. He didn't want to think about how much he needed a drink. Six months sober, and he wasn't going to end his sobriety like this.

"Bailey, don't throw my words back in my face. That was six years ago. I've learned a lot, and I've been through a lot." He shook his head and took a step back from her.

"Keep your voice down."

"And on top of that you want me to be calm about this?"

"I'm sorry."

He remembered her at twenty-two. She had dreamed of being a famous horse trainer with a ranch and a few kids. He'd been running from those kinds of women, the kind who dreamed of forever.

"I won't keep you from seeing her." She made it sound like the offer of the century.

"Of course."

"In case you're wondering, she knows that you're her dad. I haven't kept that from her. But you're not on her birth certificate."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe she needed to see me?"

"When would she have seen you? Maybe once or twice a year as you drove on through? Or on TV with a pretty girl on your arm."

"Is that how you portrayed me to her?"

She sighed and shook her head.

Of course she wouldn't do that. He knew that much about her. Bailey was kind. She had faith, and he'd taken advantage of her innocence. That had haunted him for years. Her tears had haunted him, too, and her regret.

"I told her that someday she could meet you."

"That's great, Bailey." He took a step back. "I have a daughter and you were going to let me meet her *someday*?"

"What did you expect from me, Cody?"

"Bailey, I don't know the right answer to that. I just know that I have a daughter and she's five years old. Don't ask me to make sense of this or tell you how I would have reacted a few years ago."

"I'm a different person today."

"Older and wiser?"

"Something like that."

He couldn't adjust with Bailey staring at him with soft brown eyes and a guilty flush staining her cheeks. He had to get away from her because he didn't know if he should hug her or throttle her.

"I need to think."

She shrugged as if it didn't matter. But he could tell that it did. It mattered to him, too.

And he had honestly thought he'd be able to stop by, say his apologies and leave. He'd been surprised on more counts than one. He'd been surprised with a daughter, and surprised that Bailey Cross still had the ability to undo him.

"I have to ride in Springfield tonight." He walked to his truck, followed by the tongue-wagging blue heeler. He turned when he realized that Bailey was right behind him. "I'm leaving my RV here so that you'll know I'm coming back. I'm not a twenty-five-year-old kid now, Bailey. I don't run."

"I'm sure you don't."

"Maybe I shouldn't even go to Springfield."

"I think you should go, Cody. You can call and we'll talk this out." She took a few steps toward him, and he hadn't counted on the rush of feelings and memories that returned. "I know you can't miss this ride. I know you're at the top of the point standings."

"Bailey, some things are more important than eight seconds on a bull. Family is more important."

"I know that. But I also know what this world title means to you."

"I'm coming back," Cody said. "Tonight."

He leaned to unhitch the RV from the back of his truck, aware that she stood next to him, her hand shoved into the front pockets of her jeans.

"Fine, you can come back and we'll talk." Bailey backed up a step, as if wanting that distance between them. "We'll work something out."

"Work something out?" He shoved the tongue of the trailer off the hitch and turned to face her. "You make it sound like we're disputing over a property line and not a little girl with eyes like mine."

"Cody, I am sorry."

He shook his head and raised his hand to wave off her words. Instead of staying to argue, he got into his truck and pulled away. When he glanced into his rearview mirror she was walking across the lawn to the farmhouse where she'd grown up.

And inside that house was a little girl he should have known about, a little girl who needed to know her daddy. He wasn't going to walk away this time. Bailey Cross would have to find a way to deal with that.

* * *

Bailey stopped on the back porch, lingering for a long moment in the breeze created by the overhead ceiling fan. Inside the house her dad and daughter were waiting.

Driving down the road was the man who had given her that child and broken her heart. Her head was spinning like the blades on the ceiling fan.

She'd forgiven him. She had really thought she'd forgotten. Instead it all returned in a heady flash of memory, including remnants of the pain she'd felt when he'd left her in Wyoming.

After Meg's birth she had done what she'd been taught—she'd pulled herself up by her bootstraps and moved on. As a single mother coping with lonely nights and an uncertain future, she hadn't had

time for wallowing in her mistakes.

~~How was she going to deal with Cody Jacobs? Worse, how was she going to deal with the fact that having him back in her life had turned her emotions inside out?~~

And then came fear. Would he take Meg away from her? Would his knowing about their daughter mean that holidays and summer vacations would be spent apart? How would she cope with sharing Meg?

Bailey stopped the downward spiral of thoughts. She wouldn't be sharing Meg with a stranger. Cody was Meg's dad. He had rights.

That assurance didn't make her feel any better.

She leaned against the side of the house, waiting for the world to right itself before crossing the threshold to face her dad. The dog lumbered up the steps and belly crawled across the porch. Bailey reached down and Blue nuzzled her hand as if the dog knew she needed to be comforted.

"Thanks, girl."

When she walked into the kitchen, her dad was there, waiting for her. Bailey pulled a pitcher of tea out of the fridge and pretended that nothing had happened. Not that she'd get away with pretending. Her dad had probably heard the entire conversation through the open window.

"Who were you talking to?" Jerry Cross was leaning on the counter, his afternoon meds in his hand. His skin had lost the healthy farmer's tan he'd always worn. Now he just looked old and gray. And he wasn't old.

Every time Bailey looked at him and saw him wasting away in front of her, she wanted to cry. She wanted to explain to God that it wasn't fair. She had lost her mom when she was ten. Now she was losing her dad.

And Cody Jacobs's RV was parked in her driveway.

"It was..." She turned to see if her daughter was in the room.

"She's watching that goofy cartoon she likes."

"That was Cody Jacobs."

"Humph."

"He came to apologize."

"I guess he got more than he bargained for." He coughed, the moment of breathlessness lasting longer than a week ago and leaving him weak enough that he had to sit at the kitchen table. "His RV is still here."

"He says he's coming back."

Her dad looked almost pleased. "Good for him."

"Good for him? Dad, this isn't good for me. It isn't good for Meg."

"Maybe it's good for me." He wiped a large, work-worn hand across his face. "Maybe I need this, Bailey. Maybe I need to know that he's here for you."

"He showed up to apologize. That doesn't put him in my life. I don't want him in my life. I don't want to be his girl of the week. Isn't that what the announcers on the sports channel call the women who hang on to his arm?"

"We've both noticed a change in him since that bull trampled him last winter." Once broad shoulders shrugged. "People change."

Bailey couldn't agree more. She had changed. At twenty-two she had gone to Wyoming for a summer work program, starry-eyed and thinking that all cowboys were heroes. She had come home four months later, pregnant and brokenhearted.

It had taken her more than a year to forgive herself and move on. She had struggled with the truth,

that God's grace was sufficient. She had grown and learned how to stand on her own two feet without dreams of a man rescuing her.

Now she had a dad and a little girl who needed her. She had a farm with a second mortgage, back taxes seriously in arrears and medical bills piling up in a basket on the coffee table. She had horses that needed to be fed.

"Dad, I have to get to work. You have to let me be an adult and take care of this myself."

Moisture shimmered in her dad's brown eyes. "I know you can take care of things, Bailey. I only wish I could help you more."

She hugged him tightly, her heart breaking because of his continued weight loss.

"Don't worry, Dad. We have peace, remember?"

"Peace." He nodded as he whispered the word.

Bailey walked to the back door. "I need to walk to the back pasture to check on that cow that didn't come up this afternoon. Can you keep an eye on Meg?"

"I'll watch her." He swallowed his pills before continuing. "He has a right to know his daughter."

"I know."

She knew, but she didn't quite know how to deal with it, not yet. Cody now knew about Meg. It had to happen sooner or later. She wouldn't have been able to remain out of the rodeo circuit forever. Avoiding Cody had meant avoiding people who could send horses her way for training.

Maybe God had meant for it to happen this way, with Cody driving into her life when she had the least amount of energy to fight? And maybe, just maybe, he would meet Meg and then leave town.

Chapter Two

Bulls bellowed and snorted, the sound combining with the steady hum of the crowd and the banter of cowboys, medical staff and stock contractors. Cody leaned against the wall in a corner of the area that was almost quiet.

“What’s up with you?”

“Bradshaw, I didn’t know you were here.” Cody smiled at the guy who had been a friend for years. Rivalry had come between them a few times. And for a while Jason Bradshaw’s faith had driven a huge wedge between them.

Cody hadn’t known what to do when his friend “found religion” two years earlier. They had gone from being drinking buddies to strangers, both wanting different things out of life.

The rift had grown until the day seven months earlier when Cody had woken up in a hospital, unsure of who he was or where he was. Later he had watched tapes of the fall. The wreck of the season, they called it. He had been twisted in the bull rope, dangling from the side of a fifteen-hundred-pound animal. When Cody came loose, the bull twisted and the two butted heads with a force that had given him a huge concussion and some loss of memory.

Jason said it must have knocked some sense into him, because the Sunday after his release from the hospital Cody gave in to the urge to attend the church service the bull riders held each week. He had stood next to his friend, hearing a message his grandfather had tried to tell him when he had been too young to understand. Later on in life he had thought he didn’t need it.

That Sunday he knew he needed it. He knew that he needed to be forgiven. He needed the promise contained in those words, and he needed a fresh start.

He had never dreamed his second chance would lead him to Gibson, Missouri, and a little girl named Meg.

“You look like you got hit by a semitruck.” Jason nudged Cody’s side, gaining his attention.

“Something like that.”

“Did you see Bailey?”

Cody moved to the side to see why the crowd was roaring. He watched a young rider make it to eight seconds and then some. The kids on tour were going great guns with enthusiasm and bodies that weren’t being kept mobile with cortisone injections, Ace bandages and a diet of ibuprofen.

“Remember what that felt like?” Jason laughed and watched as the kid on the bull jumped off, landing on his feet and running out of the arena without a limp.

“Vaguely.” He remembered what yesterday felt like, when he knew who he was and that his life was all about winning the bull-riding championship and walking away with a seven-figure check. Now his goals were as scrambled as his insides.

“I found out today that I’m a dad. I have a five-year-old daughter named Meg.”

Jason took off his hat and ran a hand through short red hair, his eyes widening as he leaned back against the wall. His being speechless didn’t happen often. Cody was sort of glad his friend reacted with stunned silence. His surprise validated Cody’s own feelings of disbelief.

“Wow.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

Jason laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “Congratulations?”

“Thanks. I think.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, if Bailey was seventeen and madly in love with me, I’d do the right thing and marry her. Right now she’s about twenty-eight, and I’m pretty sure she hates me. So that leaves the little girl. I might have a chance with her, but I’m not sure.”

His daughter, a sprite with her mother’s perky nose, heart-shaped face and flaxen hair. Cowgirls were hard to beat. They were tough as nails and soft as down. Until you made them mad. Bailey was definitely mad. She had a right to be, but that didn’t help Cody.

He had a daughter. It was still sinking in. Thinking back, he remembered the luminous look in Bailey’s eyes when she said she loved him, and then the tears when he teased her about cowgirls always thinking they were in love. Finally there were the frantic phone calls that lasted five or six months after she left Wyoming. It all made sense now.

He looked down, shaking his head at the tumble of thoughts rolling through his mind. He had missed out on five years. Without knowing it, he had become his own dad.

“Cody, don’t beat yourself up for something you didn’t know about.”

“If I had called her back, I would have known. Instead I went on my merry way, thinking she just wanted to cry and try to drag me back into her life.” He fastened the Kevlar vest that bull riders wore for protection and tried to concentrate on the ride about to take place. “I should have known Bailey better than to think that about her.”

“You know, I think you only ran because you were so stinking in love with her.” Jason laughed as he said the words, his loud outburst drawing the quick glances of a dozen men in the area.

“Do you think you could announce it to the whole world?”

“Sorry, but I think they’re going to find out sooner or later.”

Cody pulled off his hat and ran shaking fingers through his hair. “I could use a...”

“Friend to pray with?” Jason smiled as he replaced the word with something that wouldn’t undo six months of sobriety.

“Yes, prayer.” His new way of dealing with stress. “I have a daughter, Jason. What in the world am I going to do with her?”

“Buy her a pony?”

“My dad bought me a pony.”

Jason slapped him on the back. “Go back to Gibson, Missouri, and get to know your daughter. You’ve got enough money in the bank to last more than a few years, and a good herd of cattle down in Oklahoma. Maybe it’s time to start using your nest egg to build a nest? You could even use that business degree of yours for something other than balancing a feed bill and tallying your earnings.”

“What if I can’t be a dad?” He didn’t know how to be something he’d never had. That’s why he’d run from girls looking for “forever.”

“No one really knows how. I think you just learn as you go. It’s probably a lot like bull riding, the more you work at it, the better you get.”

Someone shouted Cody’s name. He was up soon. He tipped his hat to Jason and told him he probably would lay off the tour after this event, at least for a few weeks, at least until he settled things with Bailey.

And he would give up ever being a world champion. His goal and his dream for more years than he could remember had been within his grasp, but one afternoon in Gibson, Missouri, had changed everything.

Five minutes later he was slipping onto the back of a bull named Outta Control. He hated that bull. It was part Mexican fighting bull and part insane. As he pulled his bull rope tight, wrapping it around

his gloved hand, the bull jerked and snorted. The crazy animal obviously thought the eight seconds started before the gate opened.

Cody squeezed his knees against the animal's heaving sides and hunched forward, preparing for the moment that the gate would open. Foam and slobber slung around his face as the bull bellowed and shook his mammoth head.

"This is crazy." He muttered the words to no one in particular as he nodded his head and the gate flew open.

If he survived this ride, he was going back to Gibson, to his daughter and to Bailey. He would find way to be a dad.

* * *

The fact that Cody's RV was still in the drive the next morning meant nothing to Bailey. The problem was, his truck was there to. That meant he'd survived his ride and returned.

She didn't know how to feel about Cody Jacobs keeping promises. Six years ago they'd been sitting around a campfire when he leaned over and whispered that he loved her. She had believed him. She had really thought they might have forever.

She wouldn't be so quick to believe, not this time. This time she would protect her heart, and she would protect her daughter. Changed or not, Cody was a bull rider, and the lure of the world title would drag him back to the circuit, probably sooner than later.

"He got in at around midnight. He was walking straight but a little stooped." Her dad had followed her to the porch. He pressed a cup of coffee into her hand.

"What were you doing up?"

"Praying, thinking and waiting to see if he'd come back." Jerry Cross smiled.

"Nice, Dad. It sort of makes me feel like you're plotting against me."

"Not at all, cupcake." He scooted past her and back to the kitchen. "Want me to feed this morning?"

"Nope, I'll do it. I have to face him sooner or later." She glanced over the rim of her cup and watched the dark RV. "You mind listening for Meg?"

"Honey, you know I don't. And you know I don't mind feeding."

"It's too hot. The humidity would..." Her heart ached with a word that used to be so easy.

"Don't cry on me, pumpkin. And the humidity isn't going to kill me." He winked before he walked away.

Bailey prayed again, the silent prayer that had become constant. *Please God, don't take my dad.* She knew what the doctors said, and she knew with her own eyes that he was failing fast. She didn't know what she'd do without him in her life.

She drained her cup of coffee and walked out the back door. The RV in the drive was still dark and silent. The barn wasn't. As she walked through the door, she heard music on the office radio and noises from the corral.

Cody turned and smiled when she walked out the open double doors on the far side of the barn. Her favorite mare was standing next to him, and he was running his hand over the animal's bulging side.

That mare and the foal growing inside of her were the future hope of Bailey's training and breeding program. If that little baby had half the class and durability of his daddy, the Rocking C would have a chance of surviving.

"Any day now." Cody spoke softly, either to her or to the mare. She and the mare both knew that it would be any day.

“What are you doing here?”

He glanced up, his hat shading his eyes. “I told you I’d be back. I’m in it for the long haul, Bailey.”

“In what for the long haul?”

He shot her a disgusted look and sighed. “I’m a father. I might be coming into this a little late, but I want to be a part of Meg’s life.”

“So, you’ve gone from the guy who didn’t want to be tied down to the guy who is in fatherhood for the long haul?”

“When confronted with his mistakes, a guy can make a lot of changes.” He slid his hand down the mare’s misty-gray neck, but his gaze connected with Bailey’s. “I’m alive, and God gave me a second chance. I don’t take that lightly.”

“I see.” But she didn’t, not really.

Bailey walked back into the barn, knowing he followed. When she turned, she noticed that he was following at a very fast pace. The limp and slightly stooped posture said a lot.

“Take a fall last night?”

He grinned and shrugged muscular shoulders. “Not so much of a fall as a brush-off. This is what one might call ‘cowboy, meet gate—gate, meet cowboy.’ The bull did the introductions.”

“Anything broken?” Not that she cared.

“Just bruised.”

“Good, then you should be able to hitch that RV back to your truck and leave today.”

“Actually, no, I can’t. Funny, I’ve never really had a reason to stick before, but I like Missouri and so this isn’t such a bad thing. And the folks at the Hash-It-Out Diner all think you’re real pretty and a good catch.”

Bailey searched for something to throw at him, just about anything would work. She wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face. Especially when smug was accompanied by a wink and a dimpled smile.

“Cody, I don’t need this. You don’t understand what it’s like here and how long it took me to rebuild my reputation after that summer in Wyoming.”

He didn’t understand about going to church six months pregnant, knowing God forgave, but people weren’t as likely to let go of her mistake.

“I didn’t tell them who I am, or that I’m Meg’s dad.” He turned on the water hose as he spoke. “I think most of them have gotten over it, Bailey. Except maybe Hazel. Hazel has a daughter in Springfield who is a schoolteacher and a real good girl.”

Bailey groaned as she scooped out feed and emptied it into a bucket. Cody dragged the hose to the water trough just outside the back door. He left it and walked back inside.

“Yes, Maria is a good girl. I’ll introduce the two of you.” She managed a smile.

“Bailey, I was teasing.” Smelling like soap and coffee, he walked next to her. “This isn’t about us, or a relationship. This is about a child I didn’t know that I had. I’m not proposing marriage, and I’m not trying to move in. I want the chance to know my daughter.”

Bailey glanced in his direction before walking off with the bucket of grain and the scoop. She remembered that he had shown up for a purpose other than his daughter.

“Why did you come to apologize?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have thirty minutes before I need to leave for work.”

Cody took the bucket from her hand and started the job of dumping feed into the stalls. “You water, I’ll feed. And they told me you work three days a week at the Hash-It-Out.”

“Since Dad can’t work, we do what we can to make ends meet.” She didn’t tell him that the ends

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