HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

HOME on the RANCH

The Cowboy's Family

Brenda Minton

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Аннотация

Widower Wyatt Johnson brought his two little girls home to Dawson, Oklahoma, looking for a place to heal. The grief from his wife's death still lingers, but it's time to move on and try to live a simple life. He's in for a surprise when he finds a lovely young nanny on his doorstep, ready to give him the help he won't admit he needs. Now his life is far from simple, which may be a blessing in disguise.In Rachel Waters he finds a nurturing, vivacious woman whom his daughters adore. Together, Wyatt and Rachel can help each other realize that they're deserving of laughter, friendshipand love.

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“Can I help?”

Hadn’t she helped enough?

“No.” Wyatt walked away because it was a lot easier than staying there to answer more of her questions. He knew it probably seemed rude, but she didn’t have a clue.

Rachel didn’t know that he was rebuilding his family and that it took every bit of energy he had. Everything he had went to his girls, into making them smile and making their lives stable.

As he walked into the barn, he glanced back. Rachel leaned to talk to Kat. Curls fell forward, framing her face, but a hand came up to push her hair back. She smiled and leaned to kiss his daughter on the cheek.

He walked into the shadowy interior of the barn and flipped on a light. He breathed in the familiar scents. Cows, horses, hay and leather. He could deal with this. He couldn’t deal with a beautiful woman who seemed to love his girls as much as he did.

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 the Steeple Hill Love Inspired line came true. Brenda lives in the rural Ozarks with her husband, three kids and an abundance of cats and dogs. She enjoys a chaotic life that she wouldn't trade for anything—except, on occasion, a beach house in Texas. You can stop by and visit at her website, www.brendaminton.net.

The Cowboy's Family
Brenda Minton

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing:
Thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.
—Psalms 30:11

To my readers.

And especially to Julie, for your prayers, your thoughtfulness and your insight.

To Stephanie Newton, for those last minute critiques!

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Chapter One

Why had she thought this was a good idea, cleaning house for Wyatt Johnson? Rachel Waters cut the engine to her car and stared up at the big, brick home that Wyatt had built over the winter. She pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head as she mulled the reasons for being here. First of all, she'd agreed to this as a favor to Ryder and Andie. Second, she struggled with the word no.

There were plenty of reasons not to be here. She didn't need the money. She didn't need the headache.

She especially didn't need the heartache.

And Wyatt Johnson had heartache written all over his too-handsome face. Heartache was etched into his eyes. It was the whisper of a smile on his lips. It hovered over his lean features when he picked up his girls from the church nursery, hugging them but saying little to her or the other nursery workers.

So what had she gone and done? As if she didn't have enough to occupy her time, Rachel had agreed when Ryder Johnson asked her to clean the house his brother Wyatt had built on land across the road from the original Johnson ranch house, the house Ryder and his wife Andie now called home.

Rachel eyed the brick, French country-style home. The windows were wide, the porch was brick and stone. The landscaping was professionally done, but the flowers were being

choked out by weeds.

It was a far cry from the parsonage she'd shared with her parents for the last year; since her dad took the job as pastor of the Dawson Community Church. Their little house could fit into this one five times. But the parsonage was immaculate. If her father could get hold of these gardens, he could do wonders with the place.

Oh, well, she couldn't put it off forever. She hopped out of her car. A border collie bounded toward her, tail wagging. The animal, black-and-white coat clean and brushed, rolled over at her feet. Rachel leaned to pet the dog's belly.

"So, at least you get some attention, huh, girl?"

That wasn't fair. Wyatt tried, she was sure he tried. But his girls often came to church with ragged little braids and mismatched clothes. Not that the girls seemed to mind. They smiled and hugged him, and then waited for him to pick them up again.

Rachel cast a critical gaze over the lawn and the house. The barns and fences surrounding the place were well-kept. The horses grazing in the fields gleamed in the early spring sunshine. She'd spent a lifetime dreaming of a place like this.

She walked up the patio steps and knocked on the back door. She stood there for a long time, looking out over the fields, talking aimlessly to the dog. She knocked again. From inside she heard children talking and the drone of the television.

She knocked a third time.

Finally footsteps headed her way and a male voice said something about the television show they were watching. She stepped back and the door opened. Wyatt Johnson stared at her, his dark hair longish. His brown eyes with flecks of dark green were fringed with long lashes. Gorgeous eyes and a gorgeous man. She nearly groaned. He stared at her and then looked down. Two little heads peeked out at her. Molly, age three, and Kat, age two. Molly had told her that she'd be turning four in a few of weeks.

"Can I help you?" Wyatt didn't move, didn't invite her in. He just stared, as if he didn't have a clue who she was. Six months he'd been home. Six months she'd held his girls and read them stories. Sundays had flown by and each week he'd signed the girls in, signed them out and she'd asked how he was doing.

She was the invisible Rachel Waters. He was probably trying to decide where he knew her from.

"I'm here to clean," she explained, and she managed to smile.

"Clean?"

She held up the bucket she'd taken from her car and the tub of cleaning supplies. "Clean your house. Ryder hired me."

"He didn't say anything to me."

"No, he probably didn't. Surprise!" She smiled at the girls. They giggled. At least they thought she was funny.

Kat, hands pudgy, her smile sweet, pushed against Wyatt and slipped outside. Rachel wasn't invisible to Kat. Or to Molly.

"We have crayons."

“That’s wonderful, Kat. Are you coloring a picture?”

Kat nodded. “For Mommy. Daddy said we could mail it to heaven.”

“That’s a lovely idea.” That was the heartache in his eyes. Rachel didn’t look up because she didn’t want to see his pain. His story was his, private, that’s how he’d kept it. She understood. She had her own stories.

Molly remained behind Wyatt, but she moved a little and peeked out from behind his legs. “I like coloring flowers.”

“I think flowers are one of my favorite things, Molly. It’s April, we’ll have lots of flowers blooming very soon.”

Rachel glanced up. Wyatt hadn’t moved. He just stared for a long minute and then he shook his head and let out a long sigh. It sounded a lot like someone giving up. It didn’t seem as if he’d changed his mind about her, though, because he didn’t move an inch.

“I don’t think we need help with the house.”

Rachel peeked past him and her nose wrinkled. “I disagree.”

He glanced back over his shoulder and shrugged. “It isn’t that bad.”

“It is bad.” Molly waved a hand in front of her nose. “It’s smelly bad. That’s what Uncle Ryder said when he came home last week from the rodeo circus.”

“Circuit.” Wyatt corrected and then his gaze was back on Rachel. “I don’t need help with the house.”

He leaned against the door frame, faded jeans, bare feet and a

T-shirt. She took a step back, putting herself out of his personal space and back into her own.

"Ryder already paid me." And she didn't like backing down. "I have a few hours free today, no time tomorrow. I'm not going to take his money and not do the job."

"Ryder should have checked with me. The girls and I were about to clean."

"After Daddy traces our hands and then does bank stuff." Molly supplied the information with all the innocence of an almost-four-year-old.

"Sounds like fun." Rachel stood on the porch, sun beating down on her back. Wyatt continued to stare and she felt fifteen and overweight. She wasn't, but that look took her back about fifteen years to a place in her life that she really didn't want to return to.

"Honestly, Rachel, we don't need a housekeeper."

"Sorry." She smiled and took a step forward. Ryder and Andie had warned her that he'd be stubborn about this.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"So, I can come in?" Rachel glanced at her watch. She really didn't have all day.

Wyatt, tall and cowboy lean, shrugged and stepped back. He waved her in and she was pretty sorry she'd ever agreed to do this. Dishes covered the counters and the sink overflowed. Toys were scattered across a floor that hadn't seen a mop in, well, it looked like a long time.

“I guess it’s a mess.” Wyatt smiled a little and scooped up Kat to settle her on his shoulders. “We haven’t really paid much attention.”

She wanted to ask how he could not pay attention but that insult piled up on top of a dozen other things she wanted to say to him. His daughters were still in their pajamas and he hadn’t shaved in days. This wasn’t a life; this was hiding from life.

Wyatt had been home for more than six months and from what she’d seen, he hadn’t done a thing to step back into life here, other than church on Sundays and meals at the Mad Cow. Oh, and he’d bought horses. He always had his girls in tow, though. She had to give him credit for that.

He couldn’t match an outfit for anything, but he loved Molly and Kat.

So this was how his brother planned on pushing him back into the dating world. She was probably clueless and really thought this was about cleaning the house. Wyatt planned a few choice words for Ryder as Rachel Waters stepped away from him and leaned to talk to Kat, dusting his daughter’s hands off in the process. The back of Rachel’s shirt came up a little and he couldn’t look away.

He must have made a sound because she straightened and shifted her shirt back into place. Her face was a little pink and she glanced away from him as she pulled her dark, curly hair into a ponytail. She continued to ignore him and he couldn’t stop thinking about a butterfly tattoo at the waist of her jeans. Did

the church nursery worker have secrets?

A little late he remembered to be resentful. His younger brother had a habit of pushing his way into people's lives and shoving his ideas off on them. Rachel cleaning the house was Ryder's idea.

Wyatt kept his own ideas to himself, the way he'd been doing for the last few months. He didn't have time or energy to worry about Rachel or what Ryder was up to.

"I guess if you're here to clean, have at it." He nodded in the direction of the kitchen. He'd put a lot of thought into building this house. Granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and tile floors. It should have gleamed. Instead it looked like a bunch of teenagers had ransacked the place.

He hadn't meant to reminisce, but he remembered his parents' kitchen after it had been ransacked by Wyatt, Ryder and their friends. He and Ryder hadn't been easy to raise. Not that their parents had done a lot of raising; more like they'd just turned them loose and told them to do whatever, as long as they didn't land in jail.

Rachel looked around the kitchen, her mouth open a little. Yeah, it was pretty bad. He didn't have time to do everything. The girls came first, then the farm, then business. Last, and probably least, the house.

"Need anything?" he asked, turning his attention back to Rachel Waters.

"No, thanks. If you don't mind, I'll get started." She smiled, a

wide smile that settled in dark brown eyes.

"I don't mind. I'll be in the office with the girls. Don't worry about upstairs."

"Seriously? Wyatt, your brother paid me a lot. I really don't want to do a halfway job."

Kat was tugging on his hand, wanting him to help her finish drawing a pony. He glanced down at his daughter and then back to the woman standing a short distance away. She was already moving around the kitchen, picking up trash and tossing it, putting dishes next to the sink. Long curls were held in a ponytail and she wore flip-flops with her jeans.

The shoes made a flap-flap sound on the tile floors that distracted him for a second, until she cleared her throat.

"Upstairs, Wyatt?"

He glanced up, meeting brown eyes and a hint of a strawberry-glossed smile. Molly's hand slid into his and he squeezed lightly, holding her close, grounded by her presence and shifted back to reality by her shoulder against his leg.

Eighteen months of holding it together, just trying to be a dad and trying to make sense of life, and now this. This, meaning Rachel Waters and the sudden realization that he was still a man. He blinked a few times, surprised that he'd noticed anything other than the broom she held in her hand. When was the last time he'd noticed a woman's lips? Or her hair?

He'd seen her at church every Sunday, though. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed her, her smile, her laugh. It wasn't the first

time she'd taken him by surprise.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. The bedrooms are fine, though. The girls clean their own. Kind of." He grinned down at his daughters because that cleaning part was an exaggeration. "Anyway, there are a couple of bathrooms up there."

"Good, I'll clean those, too." She grabbed a broom and swept at his feet. "Scoot, now."

Scoot. Molly was already pulling him toward the hall. He glanced back at Rachel. She had turned on the CD player hidden under the upper cabinets and in moments Sara Evans was singing about a runaway teen leaving the suds in the bucket and the clothes hanging on the line.

As his daughters led him down the hall to the office, he could hear the chorus of the song and Rachel singing along. Her voice got a little louder on the line about wondering what the preacher would preach about on Sunday. He shot a look back in the direction of the kitchen, but the wall blocked her from sight.

Kat was dragging him into the office, jabbering about ponies and wondering when she would get one of her own. She was two. He considered reminding her of that fact, but she'd been reminded more than once.

For the next couple of hours the girls colored pictures and he went over farm accounts and receipts for taxes that had to be filed. The vacuum cleaner rumbled overhead. Rachel was still singing. She was always singing. Even when he picked the girls up in the nursery at church he could hear her singing to them.

He should be glad about that, that someone sang to them, someone soft and feminine. And she laughed, all the time. At least with the kids she laughed. He tried to remember the last time he'd really laughed. He watched his daughters trade crayons and he remembered. Kat had done something that made him laugh. They laughed more than they had six months ago. Far more than they had a year ago.

He shook his head and glanced back at numbers blurring on the ledger he'd been staring at for the last hour. Ryder had just about let the ranch run into the ground. Not financially, just upkeep, the things that required sitting still.

His cell phone rang and he reached for it, distracted. Wendy's mom's voice said a soft hello. Mother-in-law? Did he still call her that? She was still grandmother to his girls. A week didn't pass that she didn't call to check on them. More than once a month she and William, her second husband, drove up from Oklahoma City to visit.

He didn't want to sound paranoid, but he thought it was more like spying. It was Violet's way of making sure he was surviving and that her granddaughters were being taken care of. He didn't really blame her. There had been a few months when he hadn't been sure if he was going to make it.

"Violet, how are you?"

"I'm fine, of course. The question is, how are you?" The southern accent should have been sweet and maternal. Instead it held about a dozen questions pertaining to his sanity.

Which was just fine.

"Good, Violet. The girls are coloring pictures and we're getting ready to eat lunch." He glanced at his watch and winced. It was past time for lunch.

"Isn't it a little late for lunch?" She never missed a thing. He smiled.

"A little, but we ate a late breakfast." That probably didn't sound better, but he wasn't going to lie to her.

"Right. Well, I thought I'd come up this week, just to…"

"Check up on us?"

"Of course not. Wyatt, you know we love you and the girls. I miss…"

Broken sentences. He held back the sigh. In the last eighteen months they'd talked in broken sentences, half-finished thoughts and unspoken accusations.

"I miss her, too." He finished the sentence for her.

"So, about this week?"

It wasn't a good week for a visit. He leaned back in his chair and stared out the window at the overgrown lawn. He needed to hire a lawn service. "Sure, Violet, I'll be here."

The vacuum cleaner stopped.

"What's that noise?" Violet asked.

"Ryder hired a housekeeper."

"Oh. Well, that's good."

"I guess it is."

"And a cook?"

Of course it came back to cooking. He smiled a little. “I don’t need a cook.”

She didn’t respond for a minute. “Okay, Wyatt. Well, I’ll call and let you know what day I’ll be up.”

No, she wouldn’t. He slipped the phone back in his pocket knowing full well she’d launch a sneak attack when he least expected it.

He leaned to kiss Molly on the top of her head. “You girls stay here for a second. I’m going to talk to Miss Rachel and then we’ll blow up our balloons. Later we’ll go to town.”

To the store for groceries and a cookbook for dummies. Maybe he could learn to cook before Violet showed up.

Molly shot him a narrow-eyed look. Kat ignored him. The girls were like night and day. Molly was her mother all over, but she looked like him. Kat looked like Wendy. They both had dark hair, but Kat’s was a little lighter and she had Wendy’s light brown eyes. It was getting easier to stare into eyes that reminded him of his wife.

He hurried up the stairs and met Rachel in the hallway. She picked up her bucket of cleaning supplies and then smiled at him. Perspiration glistened on her brow and her hair was a little damp. But the upstairs smelled clean for the first time in a long time.

The windows gleamed at either end of the hall and there were no cobwebs clinging to the ceiling. Maybe a housekeeper wasn’t such a bad idea. It might be a great idea. But he didn’t know if Rachel Waters was the one he wanted. She wore faded jeans

and had the tiniest butterfly at the small of her back. Shouldn't a housekeeper wear something more…housekeeperish?

He pictured Alice from The Brady Bunch. Or the robot maid from The Jetsons. Yeah, that's what a housekeeper should look like. A housekeeper should make PB and J sandwiches and smell like joint cream, not wildflowers.

"Is there anything else I need to do?" She stood in the center of the hallway, the bucket in her hand, and he'd lost it for a minute.

"No, nothing else." He glanced around. "It looks great, though."

"I'm glad you approve. Listen, I know this isn't what you wanted, but if you ever need me to come over again, just call. I can even watch the girls if you need time away."

Time away from his girls. He needed that less than anything. He needed them with him, all the time. He didn't ever want them to be alone and afraid again. She didn't know that, though. There were details that no one knew but Wyatt, Andie and a few others. He'd left Florida to escape those memories. Florida, where he and Wendy had been in youth ministry after college.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I don't usually leave them, other than in the church nursery. But I do have to head out in a few minutes and I wanted to make sure Ryder paid you enough."

"He did." She brushed strands of damp hair back from her face. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay with the girls?"

"No, I'll take them. I'm just going to the store."

Because he had separation anxiety and so did they. It was

about the least manly statement he could think of to make, so he didn't. He glanced out the window, which gleamed and the fingerprints the girls had put on the glass were gone.

She smiled. "Okay, but the offer stands."

"Thanks."

Rachel headed down the stairs with the bucket. He followed. Her shirt stayed carefully in place. He kind of hoped…and then again, he didn't. He shook his head and worked hard to pull it together.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs. The girls ran out of the office, pigtails and sunshine. His sunshine. He hugged them both close. But they broke out of his arms and ran to Rachel. She didn't hesitate, just pulled them close and hugged them as she kissed the tops of their heads.

His phone rang again, not a moment too soon because he needed the distraction from the scene in front of him. Rachel walked away with his girls. He watched them as he raised the phone to his ear.

"Wyatt, how did you like your surprise?" Ryder laughed from five hundred miles away.

"Thanks."

"Is she done cleaning?"

"Yeah, the house looks great. I'm going to think of a nice surprise for you when you get back."

"You should be more appreciative. You have a clean house and a pretty woman to clean it."

“I wouldn’t talk like that in front of my wife if I was you.”

“She knows I only have eyes for her. But you, on the other hand…”

“Ever heard of the word subtle, little brother?”

Ryder laughed, louder, longer. Wyatt held the phone away from his ear.

“I guess subtle has never been my thing,” Ryder admitted.

“Listen, I have to go shopping. Remind me that I owe you for this. And the payback won’t be pleasant.”

Rachel walked toward him, the laughter gone from her dark eyes and he didn’t even know why. He couldn’t let that be his problem. He had enough girl problems. One was two and the other was almost four. They were more than enough to keep him busy and keep him guessing.

“I’m going now.” She stared straight at him, her gaze unwavering. She had a few freckles on suntanned cheeks.

“Okay, well, thank you.” He didn’t have time for this. “Look, I appreciate what you did. The place looks great. I just…”

“Don’t need a housekeeper?”

He shrugged off the sarcasm in her tone. They both knew that he needed a housekeeper. What he didn’t need was that little smile of hers making him feel as if he needed a housekeeper and an intervention.

“Yeah, I don’t need a housekeeper.” It hadn’t been what he’d planned to say, but it worked.

What he really didn’t need was someone who smelled like

spring and who reminded him of everything he'd lost.

Chapter Two

Rachel drove away from the Johnson ranch and she was pretty glad to see it in her rearview mirror. She wanted to be a good distance away before the girls released the balloons with messages to their mother. It wouldn't have done anyone any good to have Rachel crying by their side.

She really should have known that she wouldn't be able to do this, spend more time with them, and stay detached. After years of considering herself a real pro at detachment, two little girls and a cowboy were going to be her downfall. The signs had been pretty obvious. The girls had been in the nursery and her preschool Sunday school class for six months and it had been way easy to fall in love with them.

Of course Wyatt wasn't included in those emotions. She felt sorry for him, nothing else. After hearing his conversation with Ryder, she knew he felt about the same for her.

It shouldn't matter to her what he thought. At twenty-nine, when she finally knew who she was and what she wanted out of life, Wyatt Johnson's opinion shouldn't matter. But old feelings of inadequacy didn't care what she thought of herself now. Those old emotions had a way of pushing to the surface when she least needed them.

So what? She would never be homecoming queen and guys like Wyatt Johnson always laughed behind her back.

It didn't matter anymore. She wasn't the fat girl in school or the rebel in the back of a police car trying to prove to people that she wasn't the good little preacher's kid.

She knew who she was, and who God wanted her to be. She worked in children's ministry, helped when her mother's lupus flared, and she loved her life in Dawson.

All of those pretty sermons to herself didn't take away a sudden desire for a big, fat chocolate bar. Or brownies with ice cream. She reached for her purse and dug her hand through the side pocket for a pack of gum. As she drove she managed to get a stick of peppermint gum out of the package.

She shoved the gum in her mouth and chewed, trying to pretend it helped the way chocolate helped. It didn't.

Forget Wyatt, she had other things to do. She was supposed to work for Etta Forrester that afternoon. Etta designed and sewed a line of tie-dye clothing that she sold to specialty boutiques around the country. Etta made sundresses, skirts, pants, tops and even purses. Rachel worked for her a couple of days a week, more if Etta needed. With Etta's granddaughter, Andie, married to Ryder Johnson and Andie's twin, Alyson, married to Jason Bradshaw, Etta had more need for help these days.

She drove down the road and pulled into Etta's driveway. The bright yellow Victorian with the lavender wicker furniture on the wide porch managed to lift Rachel's spirits. Etta stood on the porch with a watering can in her hand and a floppy hat covering her lavender-gray hair. She waved as she poured water on the

flowers. Last week she'd made a trip to Grove and she'd come home with a truck load of plants for the baskets and flower gardens.

Rachel parked under the shade of an oak tree and stepped out of her car. As she walked up the wide steps of the porch, Etta put down the watering can and pulled off her gardening gloves. Her nails were long, painted purple and never chipped. It was a mystery how Etta could take care of this farm, make her clothing and always be perfectly manicured.

The one time Rachel asked how she did it, Etta laughed and said, "Oh, honey, life teaches those little skills."

Rachel doubted it. She always felt about as together as a pair of old shoes falling apart at the seams. She couldn't paint her nails without smudging at least one. And her hair. The only good thing that had ever happened to her hair was a ponytail holder.

"Good to see you, honey." Etta slipped an arm around Rachel's shoulders. "I thought we'd have tea out here before we get started on those T-shirts."

"Tea sounds wonderful."

"You look about wrung out. Did you clean Wyatt's house today?"

Rachel nodded and picked dead blooms off the petunias.

Etta lifted her sunglasses and stared hard. "Well, tell me how it went."

"The place was definitely a mess." She shrugged and kept plucking blooms, tossing them over the rail into the yard. "And

so is Wyatt."

"Oh, he isn't such a mess. He just needs a little time." Etta lifted the little watch she wore on a chain around her neck. "Goodness, speaking of time. I'm going to keep watering. Do you want to bring the tea out?"

"I can do that."

Etta had lowered the sunglasses. The big rhinestone encrusted frames covered half her face. "And try not to look so down in the mouth, honey. You're going to depress me and you know I don't depress easily."

Rachel smiled. "Is that better?"

"Not much." Etta laughed and went back to watering.

"I'll be back in a few."

"I'll be here."

The dog that had been sleeping under a tree started barking as Rachel fixed the tea tray. She picked up the wooden tray and headed down the hallway to the front door. The door was open and a breeze lifted the curtains in the parlor. Voices carried on that breeze.

"So you think you're going to learn to cook something more than canned spaghetti and hamburgers?" Etta laughed and said something else that Rachel didn't hear.

She stopped at the screen door and looked out. Etta was standing on the sidewalk and Wyatt stood next to her. Etta's skirt flapped in the breeze. Wyatt had taken off his hat and held it behind his back. They were both facing the opposite direction

and didn't see Rachel.

"It can't be that hard to learn, Etta. I've got to show Violet that I'm capable."

"Of course you're capable." Etta turned and waved when she saw Rachel. "There's Rachel with my tea. Well, have a seat and while you have tea, I'll look for a cookbook."

"I appreciate it, Etta, but I don't have time for tea. The girls are waiting in the truck. We're going grocery shopping."

Etta argued, of course she did. "Well, get the girls out."

Wyatt laughed, white teeth flashing in a kind of hot smile. He shook his head. "I'm not getting them out of the truck. If I do, I'll never round them up and get them back in the truck. I just thought rather than taking my chance with any old cookbook I found in the store, I'd see if you had one that spelled it all out."

Etta held the rail and walked up the steps, Wyatt following. "I'll see what I have. Something with casseroles would be best."

"If I can throw the whole meal in one pan, I guess that would be the best thing."

"You ought to know how to cook, Wyatt. It isn't like you're a kid."

"I never thought much about it, Etta." His neck turned a little red. "I guess I always thought…"

Etta's eyes misted and she patted his arm. "I'll be right back. I'll pick you out a couple and you'll be cooking us dinner in no time."

After Etta walked away, Rachel didn't know what to say. She

hadn't been at a loss for words in years. Probably about twenty-eight of them. Her mom liked to tell people that she was talking in complete sentences when she was two and that she'd been talking ever since.

But at that moment she was pretty near speechless and so was Wyatt Johnson.

"My mother-in-law is coming to visit." He had placed the cowboy hat back on his head. He leaned against the rail of the porch, tall and confident. His boots were scuffed and his jeans were faded and worn in spots.

How many people would guess that the Johnson brothers had part ownership of a bank in Tulsa and subdivisions named after their family? She only knew those things because Andie, Wyatt's sister-in-law and Etta's granddaughter, had told her. Andie had married Ryder Johnson before Christmas and their twin babies were due in a month or so.

"I see." She nearly offered to help, and then she didn't. She'd already told him she'd clean or watch the girls. He'd rejected both offers.

"She's worried that I'm not coping." His smile lifted one corner of his mouth and he shrugged. "I guess it won't hurt me or the girls to have a home-cooked meal once in a while."

"I imagine it won't." Rachel poured her tea. "Do you want a cup?"

"No, thanks. I like my tea on ice and out of a glass that holds more than a swallow."

She smiled and listened for Etta's footsteps. Etta would give him a long lecture if she heard him demean her afternoon tea ritual.

It was a few minutes before Etta appeared, her arms holding more than a few cookbooks. "Here's a few to get you started."

"That's a half dozen, Etta, not a few."

"Well, you can find what you really like this way."

He took the books from her arms. "Thanks, Etta. Rachel, see you at church."

He nodded to each of them and walked down the steps.

The truck was pulling down the driveway when Etta laughed a little and whistled. "That's tension you could cut with a knife."

"What?" Rachel nearly poured Etta's tea on the table.

"The two of you, circling like a couple of barn cats. I'm no expert, but I think it's called chemistry."

"I think it's called, Wyatt knows that everyone, including his brother, is trying to push me off on him."

"And would that be such a bad thing?" Etta sat down on the lavender wicker settee.

"I'm not sure, but I think he believes it probably would be."

"What about you?"

Rachel sipped her tea and ignored the question. Etta smiled and her brows shot up, but Rachel didn't bite. No way, no how was she chasing after Wyatt Johnson or any other man, for that matter. She'd done her chasing, she'd had her share of fix-ups, and she'd learned that it worked better to let things happen the

way they were supposed to happen.

Or not. But she had decided a long time ago that being alone was better than pushing her way into the life of the wrong person.

It had been two days since Rachel cleaned and his house still looked pretty decent. Wyatt stood in the kitchen with its dark cabinets, black granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. A chef's kitchen for a guy who had to borrow cookbooks because he couldn't make mac and cheese. That was pretty bad.

He hadn't planned it, but Rachel was front and center in his mind again. She was a strange one. First glance and he would have thought she had all the confidence in the world. But the other day on Etta's porch, there had been something soft and kind of lost in her expression, in those dark eyes of hers.

Not that it was any of his concern.

He dropped bread into the toaster and started the coffeemaker. Excited voices and little feet pattering overhead meant the girls were up. His day was about to start.

At least he'd had fifteen minutes to himself. That didn't happen often these days. It hadn't happened much in the last eighteen months. Since Wendy left him.

He stopped in front of the kitchen window and looked out. For a minute he closed his eyes and remembered that he used to pray. He used to believe that with Wendy he could build a life far from this ranch and the chaos of his childhood. He opened his eyes and shook his head. Prayer these days was abbreviated. It went something like: God, get me through another day.

That would have to do for now. It was all he had in him, other than anger and guilt.

Eighteen months of trying to figure out what he could have done differently. He was still trying to come to terms with the reality that he couldn't have done anything more than he'd done. Wendy had made a choice.

The choice to leave him and their daughters. She wrote a note, opened a bottle of sleeping pills and she'd left them for good.

Eighteen months of wondering what he could have done to stop her from going away.

He breathed in deep and it didn't hurt as much as yesterday, even less than a month ago. He was making it. He had to make it—for the girls. He had to smile and make each day better for them. And he calculated that he had about two minutes before they hit the kitchen, ready for breakfast. Two minutes to pull it together and make this day better.

On cue, they rushed in, still in their pajamas. Man, they made it easy to smile. He leaned to hug them and pulled them up to hold them both. He brushed his whiskered cheek against Kat and she giggled.

"What are we going to do today, girlies?"

"Get a pony!" Kat shouted and then she giggled some more.

"Nope, not a pony." He kissed her cheek.

"Let Miss Rachel clean again." Molly's tone was serious but her smile was real, her eyes shining. She knew how to work him.

He sat both girls on the granite-topped island that sat in the

center of the kitchen. “Miss Rachel? Why do you want her to clean?”

He liked the idea of a clean house, but he was determined to find a nice grandmotherly type. He wanted control top socks and cookies baking in the oven. It sounded a lot less complicated than Miss Rachel I’ve-Got-Secrets Waters.

Kat sighed, as if he couldn’t possibly be her dad or he would understand why they picked Rachel. She leaned close. “She hugs me.”

“She draws pictures and sings.” Molly crossed her arms and her little chin came up. “She has sheep.”

“I’m sure she does. But she’s really busy with church and helping Miss Etta.”

“She doesn’t mind cleaning.” Molly was growing up and her tone said that she had a handle on this situation.

“Look, girls, she just cleaned for us that one time. Uncle Ryder hired her.” He reached into the cabinet under the island and pulled out a cereal box. Add that to his list for the day. He needed to go to the store again. Even though he’d had a list, he’d forgotten a lot. “How about cereal?”

“And a pony?” Kat grinned and her eyes were huge.

A pony. Would it work to buy himself a break from this?

“Maybe a pony.” He was so weak. “But first we have to eat breakfast and then we need to go outside and feed the horses and cows we already have.”

He lifted them down from the counter and sat them each on

a stool at the island.

"You girls are getting big."

Molly. He shook his head because she wasn't just big, she acted like an old soul, as if she'd had to learn too much too soon. And she had.

Most of it he doubted she remembered. If she did, the memories were vague. But she remembered being afraid. He knew she remembered that.

He took bowls out of the cabinet and set one in front of each girl and one for himself. He opened the cereal cabinet door again and looked at the half-dozen boxes. "Chocolate stuff, fruity stuff or kind-of-healthy stuff?"

The girls giggled a little.

"That does it, you get kind-of-healthy today. I think you've had way too much sugar because you're both so sweet." He grabbed the box and then reached for the girls and held them, kissing their cheeks. "Yep, sweet enough."

Normal moments, the kind a dad should share with his daughters. Eighteen long months of going through the motions, but they were all coming back to life. They were building something new here, in this house. They would have good memories. He hadn't expected to have something good for his family here, in Dawson. His own dad hadn't provided that for him and Ryder.

But he wasn't his dad. He guessed he learned something from his dad's mistakes. Like how to be faithful. And how to be there.

His phone rang and he answered it as he poured cereal into three bowls. Two partially filled and his to the top. He talked as he poured milk and dug in a drawer for spoons. When he hung up both girls were looking at him.

"I have to go pick up something for Uncle Ryder." He ate his cereal standing across the counter from the girls.

"A pony?" Kat giggled as she spooned cereal into her mouth. Milk dribbled down her chin and her brown eyes twinkled.

"No, a bull."

"We can go?" Molly didn't touch her cereal and he knew, man, he knew how scared she was. He was just starting to get over it, he hadn't been a two-year-old kid alone with a mommy who wouldn't wake up.

That kind of fear and pain changed a person. Molly was watching him, waiting for him to be the grown-up, the one who smiled and showed her that it was okay to be happy.

"Of course you can go." He took a bite of cereal and she followed his example. She even smiled. He let out a sigh that she didn't hear.

Fifteen minutes later he walked out the back door with them on his heels. Today they'd slipped back into the old pattern of leaving dishes on the counter and dirty clothes on the floor in the bedroom. He didn't have time to worry about it right now. He'd barely had time to pull on his boots and find his hat.

Horses saw him and whinnied. The six mares in the field closest to the house headed toward their feed trough. He whistled

and in the other field about a dozen horses lifted their heads and headed toward the barn, ready for grain.

A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that Kat and Molly were close behind him. They weren't right on his heels now, but they were following, grabbing up dandelions and chasing after the dog.

He turned away from the girls and headed for the fence. He watched for a chestnut mare. She walked a short distance behind the others. Her limp was slight today. She'd gotten tangled in old barbed wire out in the field. Sometimes a good rain washed up a lot of junk from the past.

This mare had stepped into that junk one day last week after a gully washer of a rain. He'd found her with gashes in her fetlock and blood still oozing from the wound. She headed for the fence and him, the extra attention over the last week had turned her into a pet.

A car driving down the road honked. He turned to wave. The red convertible slowed and pulled into his drive. The girls hurried to his side, jabbering about Rachel's car. He had worked hard at building a safe life for his girls.

What was it about Rachel that shook it all up? He glanced down at his girls and they didn't look too scared.

He tossed the thought aside. Rachel was about the safest person in the world. She was a Sunday school teacher and the preacher's daughter.

So what part of her life had been crazy enough for butterfly

tattoos?

Rachel had meant to drive on past the Johnson ranch, but the girls waving dandelions had done it for her. She had seen them from a distance, first noticing the horses running for the fence and then spotting Wyatt and his girls. She had slowed to watch and then she'd turned.

As she pulled up to the barn she told herself this was about the craziest thing she'd done since… She had to think about it and one thing came to mind. The tattoo.

She'd thought about having it removed, but she kept it to remind herself to make decisions based on the future and not the moment. So what in the world was she doing here, at Wyatt Johnson's? He probably wanted her around as much as she wanted to be there.

This was definitely a spontaneous decision and not one that was planned out. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

The girls dropped the dandelions and raced across the lawn, the dog at their heels. As she pushed her door open, Molly and Kat were there, little faces scrubbed clean and smiles bright. No matter what, he'd done a great job with the girls, even if he did seem to be color-blind. That had to be the reason the girls never seemed to have an outfit that matched.

This time they were in their pajamas.

"What are you girls up to?"

"We're going with Daddy." Molly held tight to her hand.

Wyatt had disappeared. Into the barn, she decided. She could

hear him talking and heard a door shut with a thud. He walked back out, his hat pulled down to block the sun from his face. He had a bag of grain tossed over his shoulder, his biceps bulging.

She let the girls tug her hands to follow him. He stopped at a gate and unlatched it with his free hand. Cattle were at a trough, waiting. From outside the fence she watched him yank the string on the top of the bag and pour it down the length of the trough. He walked back with the empty bag. After closing the gate he tossed the bag into a nearby barrel.

And then he was staring at her. The hat shaded his face, but it definitely didn't hide the questions in his dark eyes. And she didn't have answers. What could she tell him, that her car suddenly had a mind of its own? But she'd have to think of something because the girls were pulling her in his direction.

"What are you up to today?" He pulled off leather gloves and shoved them in the back pocket of his jeans.

She didn't have an answer. The girls were holding her hands and she was staring into the dark eyes of a man who had been hurt to the deepest level. And survived. Those eyes were staring her down, waiting for an answer.

She was on his territory. She'd never felt it more than at that moment, that territorial edge of his. He protected the ones he loved.

"I saw the girls and I realized you might not know about our church picnic Wednesday evening. Instead of our normal service, we're roasting hot dogs and marshmallows."

It wasn't a lie, she had forgotten to remind him. He seemed to need reminding from time to time. He had a degree in ministry and yet church seemed to be something he forced himself to do. She got that. She had done her share of avoiding church, too.

He'd actually been in youth ministry until eighteen months ago.

"Sounds like fun." He glanced at his watch.

"I should go. Listen, if you need anything, any more help around here…"

"Right, I'll let you know."

She should have known better than to think he'd want to talk. A momentary glitch in her good sense had made her believe that he might want a friend. But then, he probably had friends. He'd grown up here.

"See you two Wednesday." Time to walk away.

Kat grabbed her hand. "Come and see my frog."

"Kat, you don't have a frog." Wyatt reached for her but Kat pulled Rachel the other direction and two-year-olds were pretty strong when they had their mind set on something.

"I have a frog." She didn't let go and Rachel didn't have the heart to tell her no. She went willingly in the direction of an old log.

"Is that where your frog lives?"

"There are millions of frogs." Kat dropped to her knees and pushed the chunk of wood. Sure enough, little frogs hopped out. Actually, they were baby toads. She didn't correct the toddler.

“Wow, Kat, there are a bunch of them.” Rachel kneeled next to the child. “Do you have names for them?”

Kat nodded. “But I don’t ’member.”

“I think they’re beautiful. I bet they like living under this log.”

Kat nodded, her eyes were big and curls hung in her eyes. Rachel pushed the hair back from the child’s face and Kat smiled. A shadow loomed over them. Kat glanced up and Rachel turned to look up at Wyatt. He was smiling down at his daughter. The smile didn’t include Rachel.

He had a toe-curling smile, though, and she wanted her toes to curl. Which was really just plain wrong.

“Kat, we have to go, honey.” He got hold of Molly’s hand. “I have to finish feeding and you two need to be getting ready to jump in the truck.”

“We’re getting a pony.” Kat patted Rachel’s cheek with a dirty hand that had just released a toad back to its home under the log.

“Are you?” She looked up and Wyatt shook his head.

“We’re picking up a bull.”

“I see.” Rachel stood and dusted off her jeans. “I could stay here with them, Wyatt.”

She had offered the other day and he’d said no, so why in the world was she offering again? Oh, right, because she loved, loved, loved rejection. And to make it better, she loved that look on his face when his eyes narrowed and he looked at her as if she had really fallen off the proverbial turnip truck.

He took in a breath and she wondered why it was so hard for

him to leave them. “No, they can go with me.”

“But we could stay, and Miss Rachel could help us draw pictures.” Molly bit down on rosy lips and big tears welled up in her eyes. “I always get carsick.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“That’s a thought.” Wyatt picked up his little girl. “Molly, you’re going with me.”

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I’ll see you later.” Rachel brushed a hand down Molly’s little back.

Yes, driving up here had been the wrong thing to do. She leaned to kiss Kat’s cheek and then she walked away. She had a life. She had things to do today. She definitely didn’t need to get tied up in the heartache that was Wyatt Johnson’s life.

She made it to her car without looking back.

Wyatt put Molly down and he held tight to Kat’s hand because he had a feeling that if he let go, she was going to run after Rachel. Molly was looking up at him, as if she was wondering why in the world he wasn’t the one running after her new favorite person.

He needed this as much has he needed to hit his thumb with a hammer. If God would give him a break, he’d get the hammer and hit his thumb twice.

He wasn’t going to run after a woman, not one who made more trouble in his life. And that’s what she was doing. She was causing him a lot of trouble. She was upsetting the organized chaos of

his life with her sunny personality and cute little songs.

She was getting in her car and Kat was next to him, begging him to stop her. He stared at the preacher's daughter in jean shorts and a T-shirt. Not for himself, for Kat. Man, he didn't need this. He let go of his daughter's hand and went after Rachel. Yelling when she started her car. Waving for her to stop when she put it in reverse.

The radio was blasting from the convertible. She loved music. He shook his head because today she was listening to Taylor Swift and a song about teen romance gone wrong. He really didn't need this.

She had stopped and she turned the radio down and waited for him to get to her. This was proof that he'd do anything for his girls. He'd even put up with Miss Merry Sunshine for a couple of hours if it made Molly and Kat smile.

When he reached the car she turned and lifted her sunglasses, pushing them on top of her head. He realized that her eyes were darker than he'd thought, and bigger. They were soft and asked questions.

"The girls really want you to go with us. I thought it might help. They'll be bored if this takes too long."

She just stared at him.

"I'll pay you," he offered with a shrug that he hoped was casual and not as pathetic as he imagined.

She laughed and the sound went through him. "Pay me?"

"For watching them."

She was going to make him beg. He shoved his hat down a little tighter on his head and then loosened it.

"You don't have to pay me. It would be kind of fun to see that bull. Is it one they'll use for bull riding?"

"Yeah, probably."

"Fun. Where should I park?"

He pointed to the carport near the barn. "That'll keep it a little cooler. I have to finish feeding and the girls have to get dressed."

"Can I help?"

Hadn't she helped enough?

"No, I can do it." He walked away because it was a lot easier than staying there to answer more of her questions. He knew it probably seemed rude, but she didn't have a clue.

She didn't know that he was rebuilding his family and that it took every bit of energy he had. Everything he had went to his girls, into making them smile and making their lives stable.

As he walked into the barn he glanced back. She leaned to talk to Kat. Curls fell forward, framing her face, but a hand came up to push her hair back. She smiled and leaned to kiss his daughter on the cheek. And then the three of them, Rachel, Kat and Molly, headed into the house.

He walked into the shadowy interior of the barn and flipped on a light. He breathed in the familiar scents. Cows, horses, hay and leather. He could deal with this. He couldn't deal with Mary Poppins.

Chapter Three

If it hadn't been for Kat and Molly she wouldn't have climbed into this truck and taken a ride with Wyatt. But the girls, with their sweet smiles and tight hugs, they were what mattered. Little girls should never hurt. They shouldn't hide their pain in cheesecake or think their self-worth depended on the brand and size of their jeans.

Oh, wait, that had been her, her childhood, her pain.

"You aren't carsick, are you?" Wyatt's voice was soft, a little teasing. Yummier than cheesecake. And she hadn't had cheesecake in forever.

She glanced his way and smiled. "I don't get carsick."

"Good to know. The girls do. Not on roads like this, fortunately."

"We keep a trash can back here." Molly informed her with the voice of young authority. Rachel heard the tap, tap of a tiny foot on plastic.

She looked over her shoulder at the two little girls on the bench seat behind her. Kat's eyes were a little droopy and she nodded, her head sagging and then bouncing up. Molly looked as if she had a lot more to say but she was holding back.

Poor baby girls. Wyatt loved them, but there was an empty space in their lives that a mom should have filled. And they wouldn't even have memories of her as they grew older. They

would have pictures and stories their dad told.

If he told stories. She chanced a quick glance in his direction and thought he probably didn't tell stories about the wife he'd lost. He probably had a boat load of memories he wished he could lose.

"Here we are." He flipped on the turn signal and smiled at her as he pulled into a gated driveway. "Can you pull through and I'll open the gate?"

"I can open the gate." She reached for the door handle and opened it, ignoring his protests. It was a lot easier to be outside away from him. A soft breeze blew in warm spring air and she could hear cattle at a nearby dairy farm.

She loved Oklahoma. Growing up she'd lived just about everywhere, but mostly in bigger towns and cities. She'd never felt like she belonged. Maybe because she had always been the pastor's kid, poor in wealthy subdivisions, trying to fit in. Or maybe because deep down she'd always wanted to be a country girl.

She had wanted to jump out of trucks and open gates. She had studied about sheep, wool and gardening. Pitiful as it sounded, she'd watched so many episodes of The Waltons, she could quote lines. She couldn't think about it now without smiling.

The truck eased through the gate and stopped. She pushed the gate closed and latched the chain. When she climbed back into the truck, Wyatt wasn't smiling.

"I said I'd get it." He shifted into gear and the truck eased

forward again.

"I don't mind."

"No, you don't."

Oh, no, he hadn't! She shot him a look. "I'm not five. I don't mind opening gates. I really don't have to mind you."

His brows went up. He reached for the hat he'd set on the seat next to him and pushed it back on his head. The chicken wasn't going to comment. She glanced back at the girls and smiled. Kat was sleeping. Molly stared out the window, her eyelids drooping.

Wyatt parked next to the barn, still silent. But when she glanced his way, she saw the smile. It barely lifted the corners of his mouth, but it was there.

"This shouldn't take long." He opened his door and paused. "I think you and the girls can get out and look around."

"Thanks, we'll do that. If you think I can handle it. After all, I'm five."

"You're not five. You're just…" He shook his head and got out of the truck. He didn't say anything else. He opened the back door of the truck and motioned for the girls to get out. He set each of them on the ground and then glanced back in at her. "Getting out?"

"Yeah, I'm getting out."

She'd been crazy to stop at his house. She was still trying to figure it out. He smiled at something Kat said. Oh, that's right, now she remembered. It was that smile. She wanted him to smile like that at her.

"Wyatt, good to see you."

She turned to face the man who'd spoken. He stood outside the barn and everything about him said "rancher." From his dusty boots to his threadbare jeans, he was a cowboy. His skin was worn and suntanned, making deeper lines around his mouth and crinkles at his eyes. His hair was sun-streaked brown. He winked at her.

"Jackson, I'm surprised to see you here. I thought your brother was meeting me." Wyatt stepped toward the other man, hand extended.

"Yeah, he's at the bank. You know, he's Mr. Work-aholic."

"Got it. So what are you doing these days?"

"Oh, trying to stay away from trouble. But most of the time, trouble just seems to find me." He smiled at Rachel. "Hi there, Trouble."

Heat climbed her cheeks.

"Jackson Cooper, meet Rachel Waters. Her father is the pastor of the Dawson Community Church."

If Wyatt had used that introduction to put the other man in his place, Jackson Cooper didn't look at all embarrassed. "If our pastor's daughter looked like you, I might just get right with God."

Wyatt wasn't smiling. "Okay, let's look at the bull."

"You gonna ride him?" Jackson laughed.

"I doubt it."

"Chicken?" Jackson Cooper obviously didn't know about

backing down. She thought it might be a family trait; not backing down. She had heard about the Coopers. There were about a dozen of them: biological and adopted.

"Nope, just smarter than I used to be. I haven't been on a bull in a half-dozen years and I don't plan on starting again."

"There's a lot more money in it these days," Jackson continued, his smile still in place.

"Plenty of money in raising them, too." Wyatt turned to his daughters. "You girls stay with Rachel and I'll be back in a few minutes."

The men left them and Rachel smiled down at the girls. "I think we should make clover chains."

One last glance over her shoulder. Wyatt picked that moment to stop and watch them, to watch his girls. Rachel turned away.

"Nice bull." Young, but definitely worth the money the Coopers were asking. Wyatt watched the young animal walk around the corral. He was part Brahma, long and rangy with short legs. He'd been used in local rodeos last year and was already on the roster for some bigger events.

"Want me to get a bull rope and chaps?" Jackson leaned over the corral, a piece of straw in his mouth.

"No, I think we know what he'll do. And we know where you live if he doesn't."

"He'll go out of the chute to the right for about four spins and then switch back and spin left. He's got a belly roll you won't believe."

“Your brother, Blake, told Ryder that he isn’t mean.” Wyatt continued to watch the bull. The animal pushed at an old tire and then stomped the dusty ground.

“He’s never hurt anyone. But he’s a bull, Wyatt. They’re unpredictable, we both know that.”

“Yeah, I know we do.” They’d lost a friend years ago. They’d been teenagers riding in junior events when Jimmy got killed at a local event.

“That was a rough one, wasn’t it?” Jackson’s sister had dated Jimmy.

“Yeah, it was rough.” He brushed away the memories. “Do I write you a check?”

“Sure. So, is she your nanny?” Jackson nodded in the direction of Rachel Waters. She was in the large yard and the girls were with her. They were picking clover and Rachel slipped a chain of flowers over Molly’s head.

Wendy should have been there, doing those things with their daughters. He let out a sigh and refocused on the bull. It took a minute to get his thoughts back on track. Jackson didn’t say anything.

“No, she isn’t.” Wyatt pulled the checkbook out of his back pocket. “I like the bull, Jackson. I don’t like your price.”

Jackson laughed. “Well, now, Wyatt, I don’t know that I care if you like my price or not.”

“He isn’t worth it and you know it.”

“So what do you think would make him worth it?” Jackson’s

smile disappeared. Yeah, that was the way to wipe good-natured off a guy's face, through his bank account.

"I've been thinking of adding Cooper Quarter Horses to our breeding program. I'd like one of your fillies." His gaze swept the field and landed on a small herd of horses. One stuck out, but it wasn't quite what he'd planned to ask for. "And that pony."

"You want a pony. Shoot, Wyatt, I'll throw in the pony. We'll have to talk about the horse, though. This bull's daddy was Bucking Bull of the Year two years in a row. He isn't a feedlot special."

"Okay, let's talk." Wyatt let his gaze slide to where the girls were still playing with Rachel. Kat was sitting on the grass, a big old collie next to her. Molly and Rachel were spinning in circles.

They needed her. The thought settled so deep inside of him that it ached. His girls needed Rachel. Maybe more than they needed him. He couldn't make chains with clover or even manage a decent braid in their hair.

"Do you think she'd go out with me?" Jackson walked over to the gate and tugged it open. "I mean, if you're not interested."

"I'm not interested." Wyatt walked through the gate, sidestepping a little snake that slid past. "I'm not interested, but I think maybe you're not her type. Shoot, I'm probably not her type either."

"Yeah, well, I always had this idea that when I settle down it'd be with a woman like her, the kind that goes to church on Sundays and probably makes a mean roast." Jackson shot him a

smile. “Yeah, a guy would live right with a wife like her.”

“Right.” He’d had enough of this talk. “Let’s take a look at the pony first. How old?”

“Ten. He was my niece’s. But Tash is getting older and Greg bought her a bigger horse.”

“I don’t want to take someone’s pony.”

“He’s just eating grass and getting fat.”

Wyatt stopped in front of the paint pony. It was a pretty thing, brown and white spotted with a black mane and tail. The pony lifted its head from the clover that it was munching on and gave him a look.

“He isn’t mean?”

“Never seen him be mean.”

Wyatt knew all about horse traders and lines like that. He wasn’t about to take Jackson Cooper’s word for it. He patted the fat pony and leaned against him, holding his mane to keep him close.

“Yeah, but I want a little more reassurance than that, Jackson. This is for my kids.”

Jackson walked up and lifted a leg to settle it over the pony’s back. His normal smile had disappeared and he was all serious. “Wyatt, I might be a lot of things, but I can tell you this: I wouldn’t get a kid hurt. This pony is the safest one you’ll find. I broke him myself and I wouldn’t be afraid to let my own kids on him. If I had a kid.”

Wyatt nodded and he didn’t take his eyes off the pony. Even

with part of Jackson's weight on his back, the little pony hadn't moved, hadn't been distracted from the clover he was tugging at. He didn't even startle when shouts from the gate meant that he'd been spotted by the girls.

The girls were on the gate, standing midway up, waving. Rachel stood next to them, her smile as big as theirs. He wondered if she was still dreaming of having a pony someday? He'd known girls like her his whole life. Wannabe cowgirls. He used to like them. They were fun on a Friday night at a rodeo in Tulsa. They were easy to impress and soft to hold.

That had been a lifetime and another Wyatt Johnson ago. Before. His life fell into two slots. Before Wendy, and after. The first half had been full of hope and promise. The second was about getting it back.

He was just standing there, staring, when Jackson waved them into the field. They yelled and before Rachel could open the gate, they were running toward him. The little pony looked up, watching, dark ears pricked forward. Yeah, he'd do for a first pony.

Rachel caught up with the girls halfway across the field and spoke to them. He watched them settle and reach for her hands. One on each side of her.

Jackson whistled and shook his head, laughing a little. Wyatt shot him a sideways glance and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Keep it to yourself, Jackson."

"I'm just saying…"

"Yeah, I know what you're saying." He wasn't blind.

And then the girls were there, Rachel standing quietly behind them. They were all hands, reaching for the pony, saying it was the prettiest pony ever. Jackson Cooper looked as if he had created the thing himself and set it in front of them with a ribbon.

"Be careful, girls." Rachel moved closer and her hand went out, reaching to brush through the pony's mane.

"What do you think, girls? Would this be a good pony?" Wyatt wanted to be the hero. He'd been fighting the pony conversation for a while. They were still little, still needed to be held and couldn't brush their teeth alone. He'd been on horses his entire life, but that was different. When it came to his girls, it was different.

Molly nodded. "This is a perfect pony named Prince."

"Actually, his name is…" Jackson grinned. "His name is Prince."

Rachel smiled at him. Wyatt lifted his hat and settled it back in place. "We'll take him. And a filly."

"Let's talk price." Jackson looped a bit of rope around the pony's neck. "Can you girls lead Prince back to the barn so we can load him in the trailer?"

Molly was nodding, her hands moving in anticipation, but Jackson handed the lead rope to Rachel. Wyatt started to tell them to be careful, but he clamped his mouth shut. He hadn't been real good at letting go lately. It wasn't easy, letting someone else take care of Molly and Kat. It wasn't easy watching them

with someone who was not their mother.

But they needed this. They needed to let go of him once in a while.

His good intentions almost came undone when halfway to the gate Rachel stopped, picked up Molly and then Kat and placed them on the back of that pony. Kat was in front and Molly wrapped her arms around her sister. Rachel stood close to them.

“Might as well breathe and let it go, Wyatt.” Jackson laughed and slapped him on the back. “Two things are going to happen. They’re going to grow up, and that woman’s probably going to get under your skin.”

Wyatt didn’t smile. He watched as Rachel led the pony with his girls on it through the gate and then he settled his attention back on Jackson Cooper and the filly he wanted.

And he repeated to himself that Rachel Waters wasn’t going to get under his skin.

Chapter Four

Stupid moment number twelve. Or maybe twelve thousand? That's what Rachel thought of volunteering to ride along with Wyatt and the girls to get that bull. And it was even worse standing in the shade watching Wyatt unload the pony from the trailer. He had hauled the pony and his new filly home. He'd left the bull for Jackson Cooper to trailer for him.

The girls stood next to Rachel, waiting for their dad to give the all clear. They fidgeted in one spot because they knew better than to run at the pony.

Wyatt led the filly, a dark bay two-year-old, into the barn. The horse pranced alongside him, her black tail waving like a banner. The filly dipped her head a few times and whinnied to horses in the field who answered back with shrill whinnies to the new girl in town.

Wyatt walked out of the barn a few minutes later. The filly was still inside, her shrill whinny continued. Wyatt pulled off his hat and swiped his brow with his arm. The girls were tugging on Rachel's hands, but she didn't let go. Somehow she managed to stand her ground.

He had told them to wait. She was more than willing to do what he asked. She was content to stay in one spot and watch as he stepped back into the trailer to retrieve the pony.

The second he stepped out of the trailer with the pony the girls

started to jabber. Kat was pulling on her hand. Rachel leaned and picked the child up. When she looked up, Wyatt watched, his smile gone, his expression unreadable. He turned away and led the pony to the small corral next to the barn.

He closed the gate and tied the lead rope to the pole fence. "Come on over."

She put down Kat and the girls ran toward him. He held up his hand and they slowed to a walk. Rachel followed because it was time to say goodbye. It had been a good day. The girls were wonderful. Wyatt was a wonderful dad who loved his daughters.

He probably thought Rachel could be a decent friend.

She'd had a lifetime of being the best friend, the girl that guys called when they wanted a pal to hang out with. Funny that when she lost weight all of those best friends started looking at her in a different way.

Wyatt untied the lead rope. "If you want to hold her, I'll get the bridle and saddle."

"I can do that." So much for the quick escape. She took the rope and their fingers touched. She looked up, into dark eyes that held hers for a long moment. She looked away, back to the girls. Things that were easy.

Kat and Molly had climbed up on the bottom pole of the fence. They reached through and little fingers found the pony's mane.

"I'll be right back." Wyatt glanced from her to his daughters and then he walked away, disappearing through the side door of the barn.

And she should do the same. She should tell him she had things to do today. She needed to clean her room or weed the garden. There were plenty of things she could have been doing.

It might be a good idea for her to go home and spend time in prayer.

When he came back with the tiny saddle and bridle, she opened her mouth to explain that she should go. But he smiled and she stayed.

She stayed and held the little pony as Wyatt lifted Kat and Molly onto his back. They rode double the first time, so that neither of them could say they got to ride first. Rachel stood by the gate watching as he led them around the corral. Kat was shaking the reins she held in her little hands, trying to make the pony run. Molly had her arms wrapped around her sister's waist and her smile was huge.

Wyatt lifted Molly off the saddle and put his hat on Kat's head. The black cowboy hat fell down over the child's eyes. She didn't mind. She had a pony.

Molly trudged across the arena and stopped next to Rachel. The little girl watched her sister ride the pony around the arena and as they got close, Molly started to bounce up and down.

"Might want to stand still, sweetie. We don't want to startle the pony," Rachel warned.

"Daddy said he didn't think a train going through would make him scared."

"He's a pretty special pony."

Molly looked up, her smile still splitting her little face. She nodded and continued to bounce as Wyatt headed their way with Kat in the saddle.

As he pulled one daughter down and lifted the other, Rachel stood close. “I should go now. Thank you for letting me go with you today.”

Wyatt took the hat off Kat’s head and placed it on Molly’s. He turned to Rachel, his smile still in place. The hair at the crown of his head was flat from wearing the hat.

“Thanks for going. Are you sure you don’t want a turn?” He teased with an Oklahoma drawl and a half smile.

“No, I think probably not. My feet would drag on the ground and the poor pony would need a chiropractor.”

“I doubt that.” He handed the reins to Molly. “Hold tight, kiddo.”

“Have fun with the pony.” Rachel leaned to kiss Kat’s cheek and she waved to Molly the cowgirl. “See you at church Wednesday.”

She turned to walk away, but Wyatt touched her arm, stopping her. She smiled because he looked as surprised as she did. His hand was still on her arm, warm and rough against her skin.

“All joking aside, I really do appreciate you going with us today. I know the girls loved having you along.”

She shrugged and his hand slid off her arm. “I enjoyed it as much as they did.”

And then she stood there, unmoving. The moment needed an

escape route, the kind posted in hotel rooms. It should read: In case of emergency, exit here.

Wyatt remembered the Wednesday evening bonfire fifteen minutes before it started. He pulled into the parking lot of the church and the fire was already going, and people were gathered around in lawn chairs. He killed the engine on his truck and glanced in the backseat.

"Oh, man, we really should have done something with your hair." But the girls' hair had been the last thing on his mind as they rushed out the door.

He'd spent the day working the new bull, bringing it into the chute and bucking it out with a dummy on its back. He knew that it would buck, he just wanted to see for himself what they'd gotten themselves into. In the next week or two he'd take him over to Clint Cameron's and let some of the teens that hung out over there give him a try.

But the bull aside, he'd also had to put out a fire in the kitchen. A cooking experiment had gone very wrong. Good thing he'd remembered the Wednesday evening bonfire. He smiled at the girls. Both had dirty faces, pigtails that were coming undone and boots with their shorts. He was pretty sure this was a real fashion catastrophe.

At least they were at church. He got out and opened the back door for the girls. They clambered down from the truck, jumping off the running board and then heading off to join Rachel and the other kids.

She was the pied piper of girls, big and small. Teenagers followed her around, talking as she worked. Sometimes she gave them jobs to do. As he stared she glanced quickly in his direction.

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