

April, 2018

Paducah, Kentucky

Sadie O'Toole studied Bill's broad shoulders in the sunlight streaming through the barn roof. She could certainly do worse for a road trip companion. Bill always listened to her rants without complaint, and never talked back.

She hadn't seen him since she'd graduated from college, but recently her grandfather had asked her to reconsider Bill. And because her grandfather lay on his deathbed and rarely asked for anything, she hadn't been able to say no.

"Just give it a chance, Noodles. I know you can do it." Grandpa's voice had been tired and thin.

Sadie smiled faintly, remembering his use of her childhood nickname. As a toddler, her mop of curls had reminded him of noodles, and the nickname had stuck. Now the painfully fresh memory of him in the hospital bed a few weeks ago, ravaged by the cancer that had spread through this body like a devouring forest fire, quickly sobered her.

"I've left everything to you." Grandpa patted her hand. "The house, the business, the truck. Sell them, take the money, make a fresh start somewhere if you want. But take Bill out on one last circuit before you decide. For old times' sake?"

Her throat thickened at the familiar scent of hay and leather in the old barn. She'd learned to ride here on the Gordon farm years ago, her grandfather and his best friend, Chet, patiently coaching her. Out on the rodeo circuit, she'd even competed a few times in the mutton busting and barrel racing contests.

Her grandfather, former Marine Eddie O'Toole, had been her rock and world since she'd lost both parents in a wreck at the age of five. And then, a few short weeks ago, he'd been diagnosed with cancer too advanced for any treatment. Within a month, he was dead.

It still didn't seem real.

Bill's brown eyes stared back at her as she slid her fingers along his muscled neck. He was the closest thing to family she had left now. Tears welled in her eyes and she leaned her forehead against his. "It's just you and me now, *kemosabe*," she whispered to him.

"Whoa," drawled a deep voice behind her. "Talking to a mechanical bull?"

Sadie spun around. A tall cowboy with dark hair and a ragged Stetson pulled low over his forehead lounged against one of the barn's ancient beams.

"Who the heck are you? And what's it to you if I am?" She dashed the tears away with her fingers as the sharpness in her voice cut the spring air like a lash. She didn't have patience for anything, or anyone lately—not since her canceled wedding and her grandfather's funeral.

Her face muscles tightened at the thought of her ex-fiancé, Nick, and she scowled.

The cowboy straightened hastily and raised his hands. "I'm sure sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean anything by it." He pushed his hat back to scrutinize her. "Just unusual, is all. Seeing a pretty girl talking to a machine."

"He's not just a machine." The blood surged into her face, the uncontrollable blush that had been the bane of her high school years and impossible to hide.

He blinked. "If you say so, ma'am."

She waited for the cowboy to walk away. "You can leave any time."

"Well, thank you kindly." He cleared his throat. "But I work here. I came to see if you needed anything."

His dark hair emphasized the cornflower blue of his eyes in his tanned face. His arms were tanned too, and loaded with muscle. Too darn handsome for his own good. She'd had enough of men lately, especially good-looking ones.

"I'm Henry Blake." He offered his hand. "Chet's nephew."

She ignored his outstretched hand. "Why haven't I heard him mention you then?"

Many childhood summers had been spent here on the farm with her grandfather and Chet and his passel of dogs. She knew most of the Gordon family.

The cowboy withdrew his hand, and a shadow dropped over his face, dimming the light in his eyes. "I've been away a long time. Guess he never thought about me." He shuffled his feet. "Sorry I bothered you."

Henry turned and headed toward the barn door, his muscular biceps straining against his t-shirt as he strode away. A tiny dart of guilt pricked her conscience. He couldn't know how unsettling it was to be here today. It wasn't fair to take it out on him. Grandpa would be ashamed of her bad manners.

"Hey," she called.

He turned, his fingers hooked in his jean pockets, and his face carefully blank.

"I'm sorry." She tried to smile. "I didn't mean to be so rude. I—" Quickly she walked to him and held out her hand. "Sadie O'Toole."

His face lit up as if someone had flicked on the Christmas lights. "No problem, ma'am." He grinned, revealing a dazzling smile, and took her hand. "It sure is nice to meet you."

He tugged his Stetson and left, one heck of a handsome hunk of man. Why hadn't she met him before? She would have remembered those blue eyes.

Then she caught herself. *You're done with men, O'Toole. Remember?* Reluctantly, she resumed her consideration of her inheritance. Besides her grandfather's grit, tenacity, and a 1959 Chevrolet Apache pickup, she now owned Bill, the mechanical bull.