**Champion Coach, Champion Father**

*Written by Madison Harr*

The only thing that stands out is the color yellow. Eddie Cook holds his iPad up for a closer look at the photo that takes up the entire screen of the portable device. It’s then that the little girl comes into view.

She stands amidst a sea of gold, tiny in comparison to the tree that hangs overhead. The tree’s leaves are the color of melted butter. Some still cling to the branches as if they are children tightly grasping their mother’s fingers, but most blanket the ground beneath the child’s feet.

The little girl is laughing, her knees bent and arms outstretched as if in preparation for a jump. The pink bow in her hair is crooked and her mouth is parted mid-laugh. There is no sadness or heartache apparent in the picture, only joy and childish amusement.

“That’s Riley,” Eddie says, tapping her figure on the screen with his index finger.

At first glance, South Pointe High School’s varsity wrestling coach Joe Edward Cook Jr., known simply as ‘Eddie’ or ‘Coach Cook’, appears to be your average everyday guy with a normal amount of crazy life experiences that make great stories to tell.

Cook is a favorite among the students, but especially with the young men he coaches. Zach Morgan, a wrestler for South Pointe who has been with Cook since he was a freshman, speaks fondly of his coach.

“He’s a good leader and won second region Coach of the Year twice in a row. I’ve wrestled for him for four years, so I feel like we’ve got a good bond. If we [the wrestling team] ever need him, we know we can always go to him for help.”

Cook fits the bill of a coach easily, with an athletic build, dark hair that’s kept short, and blue eyes that are open and inviting. Very rarely is he caught in anything other than some sort of t-shirt or hoodie that boasts the SPHS logo, basketball shorts, and running shoes. But his cheerful yet still collected demeanor and casual outfits are not the only things that appeal to students.

The thing that students love most about Coach Cook is his approachability. He’s always willing to talk with his students, even about his own life, which is currently in somewhat of an uproar.

For starters, there’s the usual amount of craziness that comes with being married and having three daughters.

“Jordan,” Cook pauses mid-sentence when referring to his oldest, and smiles, “sometimes she’s bossy.” He chuckles before getting serious. “But she’s also very mature for her age. She’s like 11 going on 20. And Savannah, who’s nine, she’s very reserved, loving, and sweet.”

Again, Coach Cook pauses and laughs. He shakes his head a little when he begins to talk about his four year old daughter, Riley, as though he’s exhausted just thinking about her. His grin, on the other hand, begs to differ.

“Riley is *very* rambunctious. She’s wild. And very emotional.”

The chaos doesn’t stop with the girls, though. Cook and his family are in the process of moving into a new house smack dab in the middle of wrestling season. But the real cherry on top of all the craziness is the fact that Cook and his wife just welcomed a bouncing baby boy on Feb. 12. Asher Blayne Cook came into the world at 19 ¼ inches long and weighed just under 8 lbs. Only time will tell how the newest addition to the family will fare with three older sisters.

The SPHS gym is where Coach Cook spends the majority of his teaching day, and it’s as busy and loud as ever. Students ranging from freshmen to seniors are decked out in the standard South Pointe gym uniform, running around and participating in a variety of physical exercises. All the while, loud music thumps in what can hardly be described as the background, songs ranging from Charlie Puth’s “One Call Away”to Jason Derulo’s “Want to Want Me.”

Cook sits on one of the front rows in the middle section of the grey bleachers. His iPad, as usual, is in his hand. The second block of the school day is well under way, and Cook spends the first few minutes scrolling through photos. A few of the pictures are ones of rugged mountain terrain, with rolling green hills and trees that are forest green in the summer and shades of wine, gold, and ember in the fall.

Coach Cook stops when he gets to one that depicts four men on horseback, all of whom wear cowboy hats and riding boots. In this particular photo, the men are looking out at a group of cattle. The herd isn’t one that contains the typical black and white dairy cows that are fat and lazy.

Instead, the cattle are nearly all black with one or two splotches of white or a deep shade of russet red. Even through the diminished quality of a photograph, it’s evident that these animals are sleek and strong. It’s easy to imagine them moving, running, galloping not unlike wild horses across the flat parts of the terrain, a basilica of muscle and bones flexing beneath sinewy skin.

When Coach Cook was 19, he moved across the country on his own to a small town by the name of Folsom, N.M. Folsom boasted of a population that totaled out to 58 people. The entire summer, Eddie worked on a 20,000 acre ranch owned by a 70-year-old man named Carlos Cornay.

“He called me ‘Ole’ Eddie Boy,” Cook recalls, eyes bright and lips twisted into a smirk.

For three months, Cook was a ranch-hand for Cornay, spending long days branding cattle and then driving them across the land to graze.

“Every day, we’d brand cattle, move them from one pasture to the next, and after we branded them, we’d take them up to a place called Mesa, which is on top of a mountain. We’d start branding at 4 or 5 in the morning, stop at lunch, eat, then walk them up the mountain on horseback and not get there ‘til dark. It was about 28 miles total,” says Cook.

Cook returned home when summer ended. “The first year I was out there, the guy offered me a house and 5000 acres if I’d keep working for him. I planned to go back right after school, but ended up being offered a head coaching job right after college at Weddington High School in North Carolina. I stayed there for five years before I came here when South Pointe opened.”

Cook pauses for a minute, and it’s clear that, at least for the time being, the recollections of his cowboy days are over. He continues swiping through photos on his iPad, stopping only when he lands on the one that displays Riley, his youngest daughter. Or, to be put more accurately, the child that wasn’t always his child.

Riley was born on Dec. 19, 2011, but not without complications. At the time, Eddie and Emily weren’t her parents. Riley was still in the care of her biological father and mother, Emily’s brother and sister-in-law.

When Riley came into the world, the doctors quickly checked her health and discovered startling information. She had tested positive for drugs.

There was only one explanation as to why the innocent newborn was already addicted to narcotics – Riley’s mother had used while she was pregnant.

While Coach Cook and his wife were horrified by the knowledge, there wasn’t much they could do. Riley’s parents hardly ever came around, and that didn’t change once she was born. Cook and his wife had little dealing with Riley. The couple didn’t truly know the child, only the circumstances surrounding her birth and that her parents were drug-abusers.

That all changed two years later when the family was reunited for Emily’s mother’s funeral. When Eddie saw Riley, he was horrified.

“When Emily’s mom died, and we were trying to make arrangements for the funeral and things like that, the father would bring her over. She would just be filthy and nasty and unkempt. Well, we saw this for several days and you know, I tried to be nice the whole time.

But after the funeral, I approached the father and basically told him, ‘You know, it’s time to grow up, start taking care of your kid, and get a job.’ And his explanation was using her as an excuse for why he couldn’t work and things like that, so I told him we could fix that, that I would take Riley until he and his wife got cleaned up. And when they got cleaned up, we’d give her back, and everything would be good.”

In his moment of bravery, of wanting to help his niece, Cook made the offer to temporarily take Riley in without even consulting his wife beforehand. He recalls the moment with one of his famous smirks, as though he’s trying to stifle some of his laughter. For the first time since Riley has been mentioned, his tone becomes light.

“So I go over to Emily and tell her ‘Hey, by the way, we’re taking Riley home.’ And she was like ‘What?’”

Regardless of his wife’s initial shock, the couple agreed on Cook’s idea and took Riley, who was two at the time, home that night. But, their plan to take care of her only temporarily was thwarted.

“Well, we’d had her for a couple of weeks and they [her parents] hadn’t even called to check up on her. So that was when we decided that it would be best if she stayed with us. And that’s when we got lawyers involved and had an emergency hearing. We had to have custody of Riley for a year before we had the opportunity to go to trial and terminate their parental rights,” Coach Cook says solemnly.

The realization that Riley’s parents couldn’t be bothered to call wasn’t the only red flag that raised questions and led the Cooks to the decision to begin the process of adopting her. There were other factors, things about Riley that hinted at neglect much worse than just stained clothes, grubby cheeks, and hair so tangled that it took nearly 45 minutes to brush through completely.

“When we first got her home, we put her down for a nap. After a while, I looked at Emily and said, ‘When’d you put her down for a nap?’ and Emily said, ‘About noon.’ Well, by then it was already 3:30. So, I went in to check on her and she was just sitting there, crying. But, she wasn’t making any noise.”

The room set aside for Riley included her crib, which also turned into a bed. Riley was sitting up in the middle of it, alone, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Cook recalls how tiny she looked, even in a bed meant for toddlers, before continuing to speak.

“I asked her [Riley] what was wrong, and she said, ‘I’m awake.’ I looked at her and said, ‘So?’ Well, evidently, when she was with her parents, she wasn’t allowed to come out of her room and so she’d just sit there. It took us a long time to teach her that she can come and go as she pleases, that she’s allowed to come get us.”

There’s a hint of regret in Cook’s voice. Not for taking Riley in, but for the little girl herself. For the neglect that no adult, much less a child, should endure. Maybe even for the fact that he couldn’t rewrite the past.

Riley’s future, however, was still up for grabs and Eddie and Emily intended to make the best of it.

Two years have passed since that time and nowadays, Riley is a completely different person at four years old. Her once sallow complexion is bright and lively. Her hair has evolved from a dull, mousey brown to a healthy shade of dirty blonde. Places on her body that were previously skin and bones are now filled in and proportionate.

But best of all, the little girl who once belonged to drug-abusers now belongs to two parents that adore her and siblings that have welcomed her.

Cook smiles again, something he hasn’t done since mentioning his days on the ranch. “This past December, so a little over a month ago, we actually adopted her and gained parental rights. We’re her legal parents now, so she’s ours.”

 Coach Cook goes on to explain a little bit of what Riley is like now. He describes her as wildly emotional, loving, and just a bit sassy.

“She’s starting to make all these gestures, hand on her hips and stuff like that. She’s going through that phase where rules are a big deal. Not that she follows them,” he emphasizes with chuckle, “just that she knows them.”

“And it’s funny because she knows what we expect, so she’ll get on our older girls for us. I mean, she’ll just be in there chewing them out about their room or something. And they’ll be like, ‘Well, Riley, is your room clean?’ And she says, ‘Now, wait, we not talkin’ ‘bout me right now. We talkin’ ‘bout you.’”

All in all, it seems that Riley is turning into a beautiful little girl with an equally wonderful family. Coach Cook frequently states that he and his wife wouldn’t change a thing about their decision to take her in.

In terms of how Riley feels about her situation, Cook smiles and grins. “She definitely thinks she’s ours.”