



Destined for the Cowboy

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Description: Is she ready to take a risk?

Trista Thorpe may not be a native Texan, but her love for the state and its history abounds thanks to her late husband. When her newly widowed and very famous brother arrives with her beloved nephew, she devotes herself to helping them walk that painful path of healing she knows so well. Then, at the horse haven her brother and his new love created for other children working through grief, she literally collides with a man who's unlike anyone she's ever met.

Half blacksmith, half horse-whisperer, loner Logan Fox feels a spark when he meets the sister of the star who hired him to keep their therapy horses well shod and calm. And when he keeps running into Tris at the historical sites he often visits, it seems less like coincidence and more like fate. He's intrigued, but unwilling to take the next step. She's his boss' sister, and her late husband was a town legend. But Logan, who had a rough childhood, finds himself starting to trust and wanting more.

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Chapter One

Today was an avoid-the-memories day.

Trista Thorpe Carhart was used to those. In some unemotional—or perhaps simply numb—part of her brain, she had managed to box up the pain and sadness most of the time, but every once in a while it still hit her hard, even after more than seven years. She tried to take heart from the fact that it happened less often, and except on rare occasions didn't swamp her anymore.

Today was one of those rare occasions.

And so she took the long way around to avoid going by the high school. Not that Creekbend High wasn't a great-looking school, but it was great-looking in large part because of the dedicated work and talent of David Carhart. David Carhart, who had designed the update, spearheaded the funding drive, and seen it through until the school was the pride of Last Stand, and the envy of the county.

David Carhart who had died seven years ago today.

Her husband.

The man who had swept her off her feet when she was twenty-three, proposed to her on her twenty-fourth birthday, and given her the three most glorious years she'd ever had in her life. She didn't count the last year as glorious, because it had been a war. A vicious, sometimes bloody, always agonizing war.

You're in as big a battle as I ever saw.

Those words rang in her mind, as they often did. They'd come from a most unexpected source, the local blacksmith she'd run into at the market. A military veteran, Logan Fox was a kind, if quiet and withdrawn soul, and the gruff statement had soothed her more than any of the platitudes others had given her as she and David had fought the insidious cancer that was eating at him.

And David had fought, endlessly it seemed, and when it was clear the battle was lost, he'd simply endured, to stay with her as long as he could. But it had won in the end, that vicious beast, and she'd lost the center, the base of her life.

She knew other people in her situation might want to run from the memories, but she'd stayed, here in the town and state she now loved as fiercely as David had. She wasn't a native Texan as he had been, true, but her love for the Hill Country abounded, and she couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

She slowed her compact SUV as she neared the gate to the Baylor ranch. She knew perfectly well her brother had practically ordered her to be here today because he knew what anniversary it was. She wouldn't have put it past him to have picked today for exactly that reason. And as much as she wanted to go home and crawl in a dark, quiet hole, she couldn't resist him just now, or her nephew Jeremy. They were coming out of their own dark tunnel, after Jackson's beloved wife Leah, Jeremy's mom, had been killed back in LA.

And most of that was thanks to one woman and her family.

"Thank you, Nicole," she murmured aloud as she started the turn to the ranch. And even now, she couldn't help smiling at the new sign that hung on the fence next to the ones for Baylor Black Angus and Nicole Baylor Horse Training.

Thorpe's Therapy Horses.

Leave it to her little brother to come up with a way to leverage his fame—and lately, notoriety—in such a good way. Even after he'd walked away from one of the biggest TV shows in recent history, throwing it into chaos and his future as an actor in serious doubt, his name still resonated, and drew people.

But in the process, totally unaware, he'd also removed one of the biggest reasons she got through every day. She'd been trying to back off, give her brother and Nic space to work out their new relationship. It had only taken one look at them together the day they'd invited her to join them on a picnic at the spot where they'd found Jeremy during that horrible thunderstorm—they didn't want the boy to be afraid of his favorite spot—to realize that her brother was happy again. That Jeremy was happy. That they both adored the woman who had changed their lives.

Which in turn had changed hers. No more daily calls to check on him and Jeremy. No more calling just to nag him about everything the show, filmed in California but pretending to be in Texas, got wrong about her beloved state. No more calling just to hear her brother's voice and know he'd made it through another day. She'd walked that path, and she knew how hard it was.

What she hadn't realized was how much the need to keep track of him had propped up her own life. Which she supposed spoke to how miserable that life was. For seven years she'd forged on, going back to work teaching at the small private school she loved, throwing herself into her work, her private life consisting solely of those contacts with her brother and the occasional outing with a couple of friends. But she suspected even they had gotten weary of her sorry state.

She had gotten weary of her sorry state herself.

And she was tremendously proud of her brother, of the stand he'd taken, and the

courage he had, to walk away from the kind of success many actors could only dream of. And then to find that he had every intention of staying, not just in Texas but here in Last Stand—which she knew when he'd moved the two horses he'd bought from the show here, saving them from an unknown fate—brought her a happiness that had eased her soul. She had a new cause now. She would help Jackson and Jeremy walk that painful path of grief she knew so well.

So here she was, showing up at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for Thorpe's Therapy Horses, because it was the least she could do.

She applauded her nephew as, grinning widely, he cut the ribbon with the big pair of scissors. She cheered as the venture began with Jackson's short but clearly heartfelt welcome and explanation of the goal, that of doing for other grief-stricken children what Nic and her little pinto pony had done for Jeremy, brought him back to life, back to the smiling seven-year-old she was looking at now. That the horse trainer adored the boy as much as he adored her was obvious in both their faces.

And the heat Tris saw in the glances between Nicole Baylor and Tris's brother was enough to make this spring day feel like the height of a Texas summer.

She wasn't jealous—she couldn't be. She loved Jackson too much for that. And when Maggie Rafferty, the powerhouse matron of the Rafferty clan, stepped up to present Jackson with the cowboy hat all of Last Stand agreed he'd earned, she felt her eyes tear up with joy for a change.

But that didn't mean it didn't make her ache a little inside. And once the ceremony was done and people began to mingle and chat, she escaped into the barn, thinking she'd say hello to Jeremy's beloved Pie, the black and white pinto pony that had brought him out of his cave of grief.

And ran smack into Logan Fox. Hard.

“Whoa. Easy there.”

Odd, Tris thought. She could feel his deep, rough-edged voice as much as she could hear it.

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Of course you can—you're standing here like an idiot with your head against his chest. And he's talking to you like you're a horse he's shoeing.

She pulled back, and he released her arms. She hadn't even realized he'd been steadying her, she'd been so fixated on that voice. And she had never realized just how...solid he was. Big, yes, she'd known that. He was as tall as her brother and even broader. But she felt as if it would take nothing less than a speeding freight train to dislodge him if he was set on staying.

Looking up at him she saw the scar she'd noticed the first time she'd ever seen him, which ran along the left side of his face at the jawline, and wondered if it had been a horse who didn't want to be whispered. And his hands, strong, powerful, and a bit battered, from his work no doubt. You probably didn't become the most in-demand farrier in ranch country—she knew Nic would have settled for no less than the best for this new venture—without being able to wrestle heavy tools, hot iron, recalcitrant horses...and careless pedestrians.

“Sorry,” she said, and to her embarrassment it came out a little breathily.

“No problem.” He gave her the briefest of smiles, but somehow his eyes made it seem longer.

“I was just looking for Pie to say hello. And,” she added, not sure why, “hiding.”

His gaze flicked to the open doorway of the barn, with its view of the festivities and the crowd, then back to her. And this time the smile was longer. “Me, too.”

How had she not noticed his eyes before? Bright green, they were the color of a Texas spring when all was coming to life, right before the eruption of the bluebonnets they were celebrating now.

Deep down she knew why. The only other time she'd actually spoken to him was when she was buried so deep in her grief she barely noticed anything, back when he'd said those words she only later realized had meant so much that she still remembered them years later.

And she'd never thanked him.

She glanced around. They were alone in the barn. She might never get another chance. "This is very overdue," she said, a little breathlessly, "but I want to thank you."

He blinked, drew back slightly. "Thank...me?"

He sounded astonished, and utterly puzzled. "You probably don't even remember, but when my husband was dying, you...said something to me. Something that helped more than any of the trite old platitudes everybody else was saying."

She heard him suck in a breath, and something in those vivid eyes told her he did remember. But he didn't speak—she had the oddest feeling he couldn't—so she hurried to finish.

"Those words, that I was in as big a battle as you'd ever seen...meant a lot to me. Not just because they came from a veteran who would know, but..."

Something about the way he was staring at her made her voice trail away. She swallowed, fearing she'd offended the usually taciturn man.

“But what?” His voice was low, and even rougher than it had been.

She managed to get the words out. Barely. “Because they came from you.” Something flared then in those incredible eyes. Something that made her add hastily, “Because I know that you don’t...talk much.”

The gleam faded, and his mouth quirked slightly. “The Last Stand grapevine is as efficient as always.”

It was indeed. Especially when it came to the more...interesting residents. And since no one could quite figure out Logan Fox, he was a frequent topic.

“Thank goodness,” she said, telling herself she’d imagined that flash of...something in his gaze. “It helped save my nephew a couple of months ago.”

“I heard. I’m glad he’s all right. Sorry I wasn’t here to help.”

She wanted to ask where he’d been, because she was curious about this quiet yet impressive man, but did not ask because she was afraid he might think she was blaming him for not being here for the search for Jeremy during that massive thunderstorm.

And before she could think of another thing to say—unusual for her since she was usually rather adept in conversation—he touched the brim of his gray cowboy hat to her in a polite acknowledgment and continued walking in the direction he’d been going when they’d collided.

When you crashed into him, you mean.

She couldn’t stop herself from turning around to watch him go. The view from behind was as impressive as from the front. The kind of view that made her

appreciate well-fitting jeans. She'd always thought she preferred traditional blue jeans, but he could convince her black ones were nicer. She wondered if he wore them while working, too. It would make sense, like his black boots did, because singe marks wouldn't show up as much.

And as he walked out the big barn doors—neatly avoiding the main crowd gathered, she noticed—she wondered again where a man like Logan Fox went when he needed to get away.

And if, like the loner the Last Stand grapevine had dubbed him, he always went alone.

Chapter Two

Logan Fox leaned on the corral railing and rubbed the muzzle of the buckskin horse who came up amiably to greet him. The TV star horse, who had been ridden by the man who'd started this enterprise. It said a lot about Jackson Thorpe that when he'd learned they were going to dump the animal, he'd immediately bought him and brought him home, just as he had for the sorrel they'd probably been ready to send off to the knackers because he spooked at all the equipment and noise of a television production. He'd seen the video of Jackson rescuing the animal when its fears had gotten it trapped in a mud flat.

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He also didn't doubt that home was what Last Stand was for the actor now. He and Nic were a great match, and you could practically feel the chemistry bubbling between them. Not to mention that Jackson's son had blossomed.

Nic told me it's okay for me to be happy, 'cuz that's how Mom liked me best.

He remembered the boy's words, said so earnestly, when he'd come to the ranch the first time to check all the new horses added for the therapy program, which, Jeremy had added, was to help kids who felt like he'd felt.

The buckskin snorted lightly and nudged his hand, since the rubbing had slackened with his thoughts. Thoughts that he admitted were hunted down to keep him from thinking about what had just happened.

Didn't it just figure.

He'd escaped into the barn to avoid the crowd and ran smack into the one person he wanted to avoid most of all.

He'd of course known she was here. He'd seen her the moment she'd arrived, been watching as she sat in her car for nearly a minute, hands still on the wheel, as if she were having to steel herself to get out. He knew that feeling well enough to recognize it when he saw it.

Too bad he was oblivious about everything else. Hell, he hadn't even known she was Jackson Thorpe's sister until her husband had died and it had been in the story about his passing in The Defender, the Last Stand local paper. It had been a big deal,

because of the man's contribution to the town in his redesign of Creekbend High School. As a graduate of the place himself, he'd been able to compare the changes the man had made, and at the unveiling had walked the grounds, more out of curiosity than anything, and been impressed by both the obviously useful changes and the workmanship.

And that, he remembered with a grimace, had been the first time he'd seen Trista Carhart. Trista Thorpe Carhart.

She had the same remarkable blue eyes her brother had, but instead of near-black, her hair was a glorious blend of reds and browns that fairly glowed in the Texas sun that day. He didn't remember much else, except that she was wearing a blue dress that outlined a lovely shape.

But all of that was overshadowed by a single certainty. He'd never seen a woman so proud of her husband. So supportive of him. So utterly, totally in love with him. It was what had driven him, much later, to violate his usual habit of silence and speak to her that day, when he'd encountered her after hearing of David Carhart's battle with cancer.

That she'd remembered the encounter surprised him. That she'd remembered exactly what he'd said boggled him. What she'd said it meant to her left him...he wasn't sure what. Except that it seemed for once in his life he'd found the right words at the right time. A rarity, since most of his communication was with horses, not people. And he liked it that way.

Although talking with Trista Carhart had warmed him in an entirely different way than talking down an excitable horse.

He nearly laughed out loud, wondering how Mrs. Carhart, Jackson Thorpe's sister, would feel about the comparison. Although he had to say, watching her today, seeing

her with her brother and nephew, knowing she'd made a trip into the barn just to visit Pie here, he thought she might understand.

I was just looking for Pie to say hello. And hiding.

It was the way she said it, as if it were a confession, that had driven him to admit he, too, was hiding. But he doubted it was from the same thing. For him it was people in general, people who, he knew, thought him a bit strange. For her it was probably all the happy out there. It had been years since her husband's death, but the kind of grief that radiated from her the few times he'd glimpsed her after that first encounter was not something that faded quickly. Or easily.

You were a lucky man, Carhart. I hope you knew it.

He groaned inwardly at the realization he'd just called a man who had died a long, agonizing death lucky. No wonder he avoided social events. He wasn't fit to be around actual people. Better he stick to just reading about them.

The buckskin nudged him, rather urgently.

"Reading me, huh, boy?" he murmured.

He knew it was true, that the horse had sensed his unsettled feelings. People called him a horse whisperer, and he couldn't deny he had a bond with them, was usually able to reach even the most recalcitrant of them, but what people didn't seem to get is that it went both ways. As if it truly was some kind of bond or link between them, and they could sense his unease or worry as much as he could sense theirs.

This ability had garnered him a lot of work, if only because he was able to shoe horses that normally wouldn't tolerate it. But as word had spread, he now often got calls to simply deal with troublesome animals. He didn't mind it. And if he wanted to

make a business of that alone, he knew he could. It was amazing what people were willing to pay for that knack of his. Especially since he'd been hesitant to take money for it at all, in the beginning.

It had been Slater Highwater who had convinced him otherwise, during one of their lengthy, rambling discussions over his locally famous peach lemonade. Funny how if he went into the saloon, what he drank depended on if Slater was there or not. Because if he was, Logan knew sober was the only way to keep up with the man's brain. And that was a challenge he always looked forward to.

Not that he drank much anyway. Or went into town much, for that matter. Only when he had to, and then he tried to hit everything in one day: hardware store, grocery store, and of course the library and bookstore. If he had time after that he sometimes stopped at the saloon, and even though he'd been there countless times, he always stopped at the entrance to marvel anew over the history literally shot into the stone of the building.

Thinking of the library made him think of Slater's wife, Joey, who helped run the place. No matter how odd the match might seem to outsiders, the saloonkeeper and the librarian, everybody in Last Stand knew how perfect it was. Just listening to them bandy quotations back and forth was enough to make him grin. And congratulate himself if he knew half of the sources they were quoting when they so casually played their loving game. He tried to imagine either of them going on without the other, and the idea just wouldn't work even in his mind.

Which brought him back to the subject he kept trying to dodge. That with the Widow Carhart—maybe he needed to keep thinking about her in that old-fashioned way, maybe it would help keep his head in the right place—he felt a spark of...something. Something he'd never felt with anyone else.

He slammed the door on that thought. He wasn't ready to make that admission even

silently to himself. He just felt bad for her, as he would for anyone in her place. That's all.

He thought it decisively and gave the buckskin a final pat on the nose before turning around with every intention of, now that he'd put in an appearance, sliding out unnoticed.

"Thanks for taking us on."

The deep voice came from so close behind him he almost jumped. He turned around to see the man of the hour, Jackson Thorpe, now wearing the dark-blue Stetson Last Stand's unofficial matriarch Maggie Rafferty had presented to him a little while ago. He knew the town's gift had been in response to the actor's respect for what it signified, and his refusal to don the symbol until Last Stand had decided he'd earned it.

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And earn it he had; Logan's respect for the man had done nothing but grow since he'd first met him, the day Jackson had hired him to keep the therapy horses in good shape, both hoof-wise and psyche-wise.

"Nic swears you're a miracle worker," he'd said.

"Hardly," he'd answered with a grimace. "I can just kind of sense what's got them acting out, and sometimes I can fix it."

Jackson Thorpe had grinned at him, reminding him exactly who he was talking to, the hottest thing in Hollywood. Or at least he had been until Hollywood had become too toxic for both him and Jeremy and they'd escaped.

"Sounds like a miracle worker to me," he'd said.

They'd had a longer discussion about compensation for his work—it didn't seem right to him to charge a nonprofit—and had finally settled on his standard rate for the shoeing and maintenance, since it would have to be done anyway, but the rest, the time spent with any horse that needed a little polishing to be safe for the children, would be his donation to the cause.

"You're doing a good thing here," Logan said now with a shrug.

"I hope so."

"You are," Logan said firmly. Then, because Thorpe didn't seem in a rush to move on and work the crowd as he'd been doing, he asked, "I hear you're buddies with

Tucker Connelly.” Logan had met the one-time rodeo star several times back when he’d been active, because he had been and still was the blacksmith on hand at many area rodeos.

Thorpe grinned. “I am. The guy saved my sanity in that town more than once. And he’s still running interference for me, sending warnings when necessary.”

Logan blinked. “Warnings?”

“That they’re coming for me.”

That was an aspect of the man’s decampment that Logan hadn’t really thought about. “Can they?”

“Oh, they can. They have. It may get even uglier than it already has. Don’t care.”

“Dad?” The call came from the open barn doorway, where this man’s sister had yet to emerge.

“And that,” Jackson said with firm satisfaction, “is why I don’t care.”

Logan couldn’t help smiling at the man. He didn’t even pretend to know how it felt to have a child you loved that much, or even how it felt to have a father who loved you that much, since he hadn’t had one at all. But he could imagine the fortitude it had taken to walk away from everything for the sake of that child.

“Not many people I both admire and respect, but the number just grew by one,” Logan said quietly.

Jackson held his gaze, and his slow smile showed Logan that the compliment had registered, and that this man had an idea of just how big it was.

“Over here, Jeremy,” he called out and the seven-year-old, dressed to the nines in cowboy gear for the occasion, ran toward them full tilt. His smile a full-on grin now, the man opposite him bent and swept up the child in his arms as if his hundred or so pounds was nothing. Jackson Thorpe was as strong in reality as the character he played appeared to be.

The boy’s grin matched his father’s, and Logan felt a tug inside he’d thought long ago vanquished as he watched something he would never, ever have.

Chapter Three

Tris pondered as she drove. She knew she’d be welcomed if she dropped by the ranch, but she didn’t want to intrude. She wasn’t exactly walking on eggshells, but she was afraid she might somehow upset the balance as her brother, Nic, and Jeremy settled into their new lives. When she did see them, they were so happy it tugged at her, in both good and bad ways. Good, because she was so delighted to see her brother, and especially Jeremy, joyful again. Bad because it made her start to question herself, wonder why she felt still so mired in her grief.

Perhaps it was because she didn’t have a child to worry about. She adored Jeremy, true, but that was different. If she’d been in Jackson’s shoes—or now, boots—she wasn’t sure she’d have had the nerve to tear down her life and rebuild it the way he had.

Maybe that’s it. Maybe you’re just a coward.

She smothered a sigh, then berated herself as she realized she’d almost missed her turn. Fortunately there wasn’t a lot of traffic and she made it, and found a parking place on the street behind her destination, which was unmissable because of the huge sections of military gear, from guns to parts from ships displayed out front. The National Museum of the Pacific War was a Fredericksburg landmark.

It felt odd, to be back to her regular weekend routine, trips mapped out long in advance to fill those days that weren't taken up with work related tasks, or playing chaperone to some school function or field trip. It wasn't just a time killer, really. She loved history, and found Texas history especially fascinating, and working her way through a long list of places she wanted to visit and learn about was an excellent way to keep her mind occupied.

Lately she had shuffled the order a bit, though, keeping to more local destinations, just in case Jackson or Jeremy needed her. In fact, she was thinking of broaching the idea of taking her nephew with her next time, not just to widen the boy's historical horizons, but to give Jackson and Nic a bit more time alone together. Maybe she would.

She always thought of this place as the Nimitz museum, since the famous World War II admiral had been born practically next door and the foundation that bore his name administered the entire operation. That thought made her smile; the admiral was, in a way, still in command. And to this day the museum followed his orders, to honor the men and women who had served in the Asia-Pacific theater in that war. Today was what they called an outpost presentation, this one titled "Hurry Up and Wait," describing what life for servicemen and women had been like when not actually in a battle.

She headed for the Nimitz Gallery, along with several other people spending their Saturday in curiosity. The exhibit was fascinating, to her at least, and she felt the usual tug inside at the thought of the sacrifices made by this greatest generation. Many people didn't care, some thought it too long ago to matter, but Tris always whispered a quiet thank you every time she came here.

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She was pausing at the Pearl Harbor exhibit when something different tugged at her. Some odd sense of being under observation, or watched. She looked up in time to see a tall, broad-shouldered man looking at her from a few feet away. A split second later recognition hit.

Logan Fox.

What on earth was he doing here? Yes, Fredericksburg was less than twenty miles from Last Stand, but why here at this museum of all places?

For a moment she stood frozen. It was obvious they'd both seen each other, recognized each other, so wouldn't it be rude to just...walk away? Or run, since that's what she suddenly felt like doing?

The very thought made her steel herself. She was many things, including a bit of a history nerd, but she wasn't withdrawn enough to run away from an acquaintance, was she? Simply because he was...was...

Words failed her, a rare enough occurrence that it should probably be a warning, she thought wryly.

In the same instant they both moved. Toward each other, as if they'd each reached the same conclusion in the same instant. She wondered if her own smile looked as hesitant as his did, as if he weren't sure she wanted him any closer. Because she wasn't sure this was wise, either, simply because he was so unsettling, and that was a feeling she hadn't had in a very long time.

“Mr. Fox,” she managed to say when he stopped in front of her.

That made him draw back slightly. “Ms. Carhart,” he said, sounding and looking a bit wary.

And suddenly she couldn’t help but laugh. “So, is it us, or just this place that makes us so formal?”

That got her a much better smile. “It’s a place not to be taken lightly.”

“No, it is not,” she agreed. “After all, the man has an aircraft carrier named after him.”

“The admiral was a Texan born and raised, and he served like one,” Logan said. “A good example for anyone.” That approving note in his voice warmed her far more than it should have.

“Indeed. And I think he’d be glad at how this place continues to uphold his principles. It’s why I keep coming here.”

He drew back slightly again. “You do?”

She chuckled, but it sounded embarrassed. As she was, for reasons she didn’t quite understand. “I guess I’m a bit of a history nerd.”

For some reason that admission got her the most genuine smile yet, and it was warm and understanding in a way she never would have expected.

“How can you not be, here? Just the Japanese midget submarine that washed up at Pearl Harbor is enough to keep me coming.”

“I was just going to head in there,” she exclaimed, not even trying to hide her delight at his answer.

And so they ended up at the display of the small—relatively speaking, anyway—two-man sub that had been part of the attack.

“I always have trouble with the word ‘midget’ attached to something over seventy feet long,” she said, staring at the long, dark tube.

“I have trouble with the idea of being inside a six-foot-wide tube with no windows,” Logan said, rather dryly.

She glanced at him, at his height and those shoulders, and she couldn’t blame him. “I imagine it would feel a little...sardine-ish.”

To her surprise he didn’t just smile, but audibly chuckled. “Exactly.”

She felt suddenly more comfortable, in fact even at ease as they wandered through the exhibit. Even though she’d been here before, it felt...new, especially when he said something that made her think about something in a different way.

He paused when they reached the Medal of Honor display. Just as she always did, never any less amazed at the incredible,impossibly courageous actions of Marine Staff Sergeant William J. Bordelon.

“I read it every time I’m here,” Logan said as he studied the citation, so quietly she wasn’t sure she was meant to hear it, “because I’m amazed anyone could do what he did.”

“So do I.”

He looked at her then, and the almost tight smile he gave her was somehow more warming than even his laugh had been.

When they reached the exit, Tris made her usual turn, then hesitated. Feeling the need to explain, she said, “I always walk through the memorial courtyard before I leave.”

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It was a moment before he said, in the same quiet way she had, her exact words. “So do I.”

Her breath jammed up in her throat, as if she’d been given some kind of award. She remembered everything she’d heard from others about this man, about how quiet he was, a loner, isolated, kind and gentle with the horses, but pretty unsociable with people. Yet here he was, being quietly sociable, with her. And she decided that it truly was some kind of award, and that it made her happy in a new and strange kind of way.

By the time they reached the courtyard, with its series of plaques honoring those who had served, she wasn’t surprised at all when he paused at the same places she did. Or when he nodded as if to himself looking at then General later President Eisenhower’s words about hating war as only a soldier who has lived it can.

She gave him a sideways look. He caught it and she said, in the spirit of that award he had no idea he’d given her, “This place...it makes me feel incredibly proud and completely humbled at the same time.”

He blinked. Started to say something, but stopped. She waiting guessing silence might be her best prod with this man. His voice, when he finally spoke, was a little rough.

“I never put it into exactly those words, but...yes. That’s what it does.”

They walked in respectful silence back out to the street, where she struggled to think of something, anything to say. The best she could do was, “It was nice to have

company who appreciates this place.”

It was apparently the right thing, because it got her the widest smile yet. Then, a bit awkwardly, he said, “I was thinking about...maybe...getting some coffee or something.”

She wasn’t sure if that was an invitation or not. But from all those things people had told her, she realized he probably wasn’t very practiced at it. She realized she was reading him as if he were one of her students—and laughed inwardly at the idea of taking this man for anything less than the six-foot specimen of pure masculinity he was—and that made her say impulsively, “I’m not settling for anything less than some Clear River ice cream.”

To her surprise, he laughed, a less hesitant, almost relieved one this time. “Personally, I’m a fan of their peach cobbler.”

“Well, if you’re going to getthatserious, we’d better hurry. That stuff sells out fast.”

And so she found herself walking with him up toward Main Street. The classic diner-style shop was a quick two-block walk, and there were enough pedestrians now, during the last weekend of the Bluebonnet Festival, to make it difficult to carry on a conversation.

When they reached the familiar, bright red doors, Logan pulled one open and held it for her. Like the Texas gentleman he was at the core.

Fortunately it was a little early for the popular place to be jammed yet, and they found one of the booths free. The cobbler—she weakened and went for it too—was as good as ever, its fame well deserved. And she knew their server, a young woman who had been one of her students a couple of years ago.

“Your brother mentioned you’re a teacher,” Logan said when she’d gone. “At Creekbend?”

“Not now. I originally taught at Creekbend High, but moved to the private school on Hillbend when my husband’s plan for remodeling the school was accepted. We agreed it seemed a conflict of interest for me to stay.”

He lifted a dark brow at her. “Ethical of you both.”

“David was never less than ethical,” she said, proud of the evenness of her voice. He only nodded, and for that, and the lack of platitudes—again—she was thankful. And said so.

He shrugged as if it were nothing. “Sometimes the only thing that gets you through a hell like that is knowing that someone else really knows how you feel, and what won’t help.”

He said it with a certainty that told her this man had some experience with such things. Then another thought struck her as she remembered just who he was. What she’d seen him do with one of the particularly nervous horses on Nic’s—well, and Jackson’s now too—ranch.

Making sure there was a smile on her face now she asked, “Is this how you do it? The horses, I mean? You get through to them that you know how they feel?”

She counted his startled look then as a victory, because she doubted this man was taken aback very often. Then, slowly, he smiled back, and it was a lovely one.

“In a way, yes,” he said, and the tone of his voice matched the smile.

Tris found herself smiling the entire drive back home. And it lasted until she got

inside, among all the familiar things that reminded her of why she hadn't smiled like this in a very long time.

Chapter Four

He'd earned this Friday morning trip, Logan thought nearly a week later. It had been one of his busiest weeks, including making a special, protective shoe for one of the Rafferty horses who'd injured a hoof. He'd worked almost nonstop for the first four days of the week, and he hadn't wanted to do this on a weekend when the crowds would arrive. They capped the number of people allowed in at once, but the number was too high for him. He didn't mind a few people, but crowds were another matter.

He headed toward the Fort Sam Houston Quadrangle. The oldest part of the fort, it contained the flocks of ducks, frequent deer residents, of course the peacocks—the birds he often thought could be an army in themselves, at the least an early warning system with their amazingly loud squawks—and the limestone clock tower that he was zeroed in on now.

He always liked to stop at the Quad on his way to the museum. It was such a peaceful place, especially given the history of the fort, which had stood here in one form or another since 1845. Now part of Joint Base San Antonio, which also included two Air Force bases, Lackland and Randolph, it was a unique combination of history and the future. He'd never had time to get here when he'd been briefly stationed at Lackland, but this would be his third time since he'd been out. And each time he picked up on something he'd missed before.

And this time he had something else added to the list. Something he'd wanted to do anyway, but now had a bigger reason. His next stop after the museum would be the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery. Because the Medal of Honor winner they'd read about in Fredericksburg was buried there.

They. He winced inwardly as he realized she'd invaded his thoughts again. Which she seemed to do no matter what barriers he put up in his mind.

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He'd originally planned a weekend visit to the Espada Aqueduct that was also here in San Antonio, the oldest aqueduct in the country, built in 1731 by Franciscan friars to irrigate the land around their mission. But instead he was here. And there it was, hammering at him, the stupidity of letting the feeling that he and Trista Carhart had...bonded somehow last Saturday in Fredericksburg drive him to come here instead. It was one of the more stupid thoughts he'd ever had, and he'd had a few in his thirty-six years.

He felt an odd sort of twitch at the back of his neck. He turned to look, to see the peacocks—such an interesting choice for this of all places—were still checking him out, to see if he'd brought them treats as so many did. As he had, on his last trip. But his mind had been elsewhere this time, and this morning he'd almost forgotten he had to get his visitor's pass. Fortunately he'd been early enough there wasn't a long wait, plus he had his old military ID and the staff at the base remembered him, so he was through the vetting process fairly quickly.

So now he'd spend the time waiting for the museum to open at ten here in the Quadrangle, communing with the creatures who had populated the place uninterfered with for well over a century.

Peacocks. Who'd have thought it?

That twitch happened again, and this time when he turned around he knew the first one had had nothing to do with the peacocks.

“Logan?”

She sounded as startled as he felt. “Tris,” he said. “I didn’t...what are you doing here?”

“My usual weekend exploration. Visiting the museum, and this time the cemetery. Because...” Her voice trailed away, as if she were embarrassed.

“Because the man behind the Medal of Honor at Fredericksburg is buried there.”

He wasn’t sure how he knew, why he was so certain, but he was. And the surprise that flashed in her eyes confirmed it.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I’ve been here before, and to the Nimitz many times, but I never thought to look up where he was buried.”

As he looked at her, standing there in a pair of nicely snug jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt the color of her eyes, his mind went suddenly blank. There were words, zillions, and he knew a lot of them, but none of them would float together in a comprehensible sentence for him.

Then a peacock rescued him. He walked up to her, in that stately head-bobbing, one foot in front of the other way they had, and not so politely poked at her hand.

“Oh!” She gave a little jump. “Sorry, let me open this.”

She’d obviously fed some change into the dispensers that put out feed that was safe for the birds. His brain re-engaged as he wondered how much money the military made off that little vending operation. They had to buy the stuff in bulk. But even if they only broke even, it was worth it. This was a wonderful spot for a little peace, and some inter-species interaction.

And with his brain functioning again, something else registered. “No school today?”

She glanced at him, while still holding out her cupped palm full of seeds for the sleek, multi-colored bird with the incredible tail feathers trailing behind him. “My students are on a field trip to Austin. To the capitol.”

A place he avoided completely. But he was curious, so asked, “You didn’t want to go?”

“I didn’t have to, thank goodness. I’ve been there, and this is much nicer.”

He let out a chuckle and smiled at her. He’d smiled more at this woman in the maybe three hours total they’d been together than he’d smiled at anything in years. There was just something about her... Maybe he was just trying to be cheerful around a woman who’d been through hell.

“This is...where I was when your nephew went missing in that storm. I headed back right away when I got the call, but by the time I got back, he was safe.”

He wasn’t sure why he’d felt the need to explain that, but he had.

“Thank you. That’s why I love Last Stand,” she said simply. Then, with a smile of her own she added, “Well, that and the history of it. Like most of Texas. If you hadn’t guessed.”

“I got the feeling,” he said. And you don’t want to know what other feelings I’ve got...

“And,” she went on, thankfully unaware of this unexpected response he was having, “I wanted to visit something else I’ve never seen, the monument over at Lackland.”

He immediately guessed. “The dogs.” She nodded. “Worth the effort,” he said. Again he hesitated, then said, hating how awful he sounded, “I could go over with you. Get

you in faster. They know me.”

“At the gate?”

He nodded. “I was...stationed there, for a while.”

“Oh! I knew you’d served, but not much else.”

“Plane mechanic,” he said. “Sorry, no glamorous pilot.”

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“There wouldn’t be any of them if not for the people who keep them in the air.”

He smiled at that. While he’d never enjoyed the time he’d spent in combat zones, keeping airborne assets airborne, he’d enjoyed the work. But the years of taking orders from sometimes arrogant senior officers had worn away any desire he ever had to tell anyone what to do. Even with the horses, it was not a command and obedience thing. It was, as she’d said, letting the horse know he understood.

She’d gotten that very quickly. Some people never did, and preferred to think of what he could do as some sort of magical thing. To him it was no more magical than forging and fitting a shoe properly. It was just something he knew how to do.

Their visit to the cemetery was a solemn one. It became a lot more than just saluting the man they’d read about, became more of an acknowledgment of them all as they walked the rows. He wondered if she, as he, was giving a silent thank you to all of them. He had the feeling she was.

“There’s something about a military cemetery,” she said quietly when they got back into the truck.

“I know. Three men I served with are in the one at Fort Worth.”

Why had he told her that? He never talked about that. And she was just looking at him, so oddly...

“I have no words for that kind of sacrifice. Nothing can make it easier. The only thing I can say is I’m glad you’re not among them.”

And he had no words for that.

“I’d like to go there, too,” she went on in his silence. She gave him a smile he could only call shy. “Maybe we should plan these treks together, since we keep bumping into each other like this.”

The very idea sparked a longing in him he’d never felt before. Planning ahead, for days like this, spent with her, doing things that clearly fascinated them both... He felt a sense of longing that was almost overwhelming, and once more words—coherent ones, at least—failed him. But she didn’t push. Because, he was beginning to realize, Tris Carhart was not a pushy woman.

They headed for the gate to the Air Force base, in his truck because he thought the guards might recognize it from his trip here last month, to meet an old Air Force friend while he was passing through.

“It’s not the newest or cleanest,” he started to say as they got into his rather battered vehicle.

“Because you work and work hard out of it. That’s nothing to apologize for,” she said firmly. And, he had to admit, admiringly, and that gave him an odd feeling of satisfaction.

“They should recognize it or at least have heard about it,” he said as he started the engine. “I doubt they get a lot of trucks full of smithing equipment through here.”

That was when she asked, sounding merely curious, “You didn’t want to continue that work in a civilian capacity, when you got out?”

He reined in his gut reaction to the question. He’d been asked it often enough he should be used to it by now. And at least she’d sounded only curious, not critical. So

his voice was level when he answered with a shake of his head and the admission, “Frankly, I like horses better than planes. And most pilots, for that matter.”

She gave him a sideways look then, and in the short glance he took he’d have sworn she was fighting not to laugh. And then she gave in and a delightful, only half-smothered snort broke through. And it made him laugh in turn, something that almost never happened.

“I get that,” she said when she was back under control. “My uncle’s a pilot, commercial, and he can be...kind of arrogant.”

“Which comes first, do you suppose?”

“The piloting or the arrogance? I think it depends on the person.”

“So some get arrogant because they became a pilot, and others become pilots because they’re already arrogant?”

This time she didn’t even try to smother the laugh. “Exactly.” The glance she gave him then was back to simply curious. “Were they all?”

“No, not all of them. Some even went out of their way to thank us personally. Not many, but some.”

“They’re the ones I’d want to know.”

And wouldn’t they just love to get to know you?

He slammed the door on that thought, and almost slammed on the physical brakes of the truck. Not because it wasn’t true—he was certain it was—but because the next sentence that formed in his mind was I would.

But then, how could he not want to get to know her better? The little he already knew had gotten to him. Especially that she was here, that she valued and respected history as he did, and visited the places that sparked her interest, just as he did. If he didn't know better, didn't know that he sucked at reading women correctly, he'd definitely want to dig in and learn as much as he could about her. Spend more time with her. Maybe even—

Only reaching the gate had the power to cut off his recalcitrant thoughts. By the time they were through and headed for the relatively new monument—which he supposed anything would seem compared to Fort Sam—he'd shoved those ideas back into the cave where they needed to stay. And stay they would. They had to. If nothing else she was his boss's sister. One of his bosses, anyway. And that was a maelstrom he wanted no part of.

Whatever this spark was that he was feeling, it needed to die a quick death, and now.

Chapter Five

Tris stood silently before the monument, looking not at the statue of the handler in the center, but the four dogs in front of him, the breeds that made up most of the Military Working Dog force. From the Doberman on her left to the German shepherd, the Labrador, and what Logan laughingly called a “maligator,” meaning a Belgian Malinois, the four-footed service members—for in her view they were nothing less—made her ache a little inside.

“What they do for us,” she whispered in wonder.

“Yes. That’s why Chance Rafferty does what he does. Why he started They Also Serve, because his K9 partner didn’t come home.”

She’d read about the organization that was based on the Rafferty ranch, taking in the repatriated dogs the military had deemed unsalvageable, but she hadn’t realized the personal aspect for the man who ran it.

“That’s a wonderful thing. I’ve been meaning to find out more about it.”

“I’ve done some work for him, customizing a couple of dog runs, and some fencing.”

She tilted her head, curious. “So you don’t just shoe—and magically cajole—horses?”

He shrugged off her teasing compliment. “I started out as a farrier—horseshoeing only—but started playing with other stuff when I had time, so now I do the

occasional specialized job. Keeps it interesting.”

She had the feeling some people would be a little surprised at the agile brain behind the working-man exterior. Including herself, she had to embarrassedly admit.

She started to walk toward one corner of the monument space, where there was another sculpture. It was of a dog handler sitting cross-legged, pouring water from his canteen into his helmet, for the loyal dog beside him, whose paw rested on the man’s leg, a silent declaration of the bond between them. She got close enough to read the inscription on the base, and her throat tightened impossibly.

“Not Forgotten Fountain”

“In everlasting memory of all the heroic war dogs who served, died, and were left behind in the Vietnam War.”

She glanced back at the main monument. “That one makes me proud,” she said, barely able to get the words out, “but this one makes me cry.”

“Not one of our better moments,” Logan agreed. “Leaving them behind like they were just old equipment we didn’t need anymore.”

“We betrayed them. I’m just thankful we stopped that hideous practice.”

“Sometimes we’re slow to learn, but we do learn.” Logan bent and swirled his fingers through the water in the base of the fountain. “And now we’ve got a place for any dog to drink from when they visit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burnam,” she said softly, using the name on the base and knowing John Burnam, a former dog handler himself in that awful war, was the moving force behind all of this.

She wiped at her eyes as she stood silently looking at the fountain, at the trust implied in that simple gesture, the paw upon the leg. And then she looked up, to see Logan watching her with an expression she couldn't name, except that it warmed her, even on this sunny April day.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to get all weepy on you.”

“Don't. Do not apologize for being able to feel so deeply about something like this. It's admirable. It's...beautiful. You're—”

He cut himself off sharply. Her brain wanted to finish his sentence for him, wanted to finish it as “You're beautiful.”

She felt suddenly off-balance, in a way she couldn't blame entirely on her emotional reaction to this tribute. So off-balance that she wished she'd driven over here herself, instead of now having to ride back to her car with him. He was acting as if he felt the same way, remaining silent until they reached where she was parked. She wanted to make some light, cheerful remark, maybe a joke about where they might collide next, but she couldn't seem to do it. When he dropped her off, even though he politely waited until she was in her car and had it started, he said only, “Drive safe.”

She sat there, hands on the wheel, but unable to quite move her hand to put it in gear. And she tried not to think that that could be the description of her entire life, since David had died.

*

Logan watched the road as he drove back to Last Stand, but part of his mind was on something else, the time that rocket attack had hit the forward-operating base he was stationed at. He'd heard the first hit, instantly ordered his crew to dive for shelter. Bare seconds later the hangar they'd been working in had been rubble. After the

shock of the near miss, he'd gone a little weak in the knees, feeling hot and cold at the same time.

He felt that way now. Like he'd had a near miss. Like he'd barely escaped disaster.

It was her reaction to the Not Forgotten Fountain that had made him nearly slip the leash. He nearly groaned aloud at the aptness of the dog metaphor.

With a conscious effort, he managed not to spend half his time looking for her car in the rearview mirror. She'd gotten here fine, she could certainly cover the seventy or so miles back to Last Stand without him dogging her.

Yet another dog metaphor.

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He did groan aloud at that one. Why not, since there was no one to hear him? No one in that passenger seat she'd just occupied. Which he could imagine her in regularly. She'd taken no offense at the rather worn interior of the cab, or if she had she hadn't voiced it. He had a habit of tossing his worn gloves and any material they'd accumulated when working at the forge or with a torch, and the heavy leather apron that kept the sparks from igniting his clothing, into the footwell on the passenger side, and as no one usually sat there he took his time about cleaning that out. But she had simply climbed in and dodged the debris and brushed off his apology for the state of things with those words that had made him feel...he wasn't sure what.

Because you work and work hard out of it. That's nothing to apologize for.

Her tone had been both approving and admiring, something he had to admit had felt good. Very good. Too good.

Didn't learn your lesson with Gretchen?

His jaw tightened at just the thought of the disaster that had been.

But this wasn't the same. At all. There was simply no comparison between Tris and the flashy, image-conscious woman who'd picked him up in a bar and lured him into a relationship he'd never understood until much later, when he'd finally realized she'd been using him as a merit badge of sorts, to show off to her friends how egalitarian she was, a woman like her dating a mere blacksmith.

He might not be sure of much else, but Trista Carhart was not that kind of woman.

A memory struck him then, of the dedication ceremony at the opening of the high school sports complex that had been part of David Carhart's redesign. He'd only seen video of it on the local news that night, but even then it had struck him, the way the architect's beautiful wife had looked at him with such love and pride. In fact, it had been one of the things that had awakened him to the difference in the way Gretchen looked at him.

It had left him in a ruefully painful position. Stay with Gretchen because, at least for now she wanted him, or go on alone, hoping one day he might find a woman who would look at him that way, as if he was all she needed in this sometimes crazy world. He wasn't sure exactly how much that image had had to do with it, but two weeks later he put an end to whatever that relationship had been, even knowing the likelihood of him finding something better was slim to none.

As he reached the city limits of Last Stand, he was wishing he'd thought to ask Tris where she planned to go next weekend.

Whether it was so he could avoid her or be there, he wasn't sure.

Chapter Six

Tris had had a bad week, and it was only Wednesday.

No, she told herself, not bad, just...distracted. It was her own focus that had caused the problems. Or rather, her lack of focus. She'd been spending an inordinate amount of time trying to decide where to go this weekend. Usually, she'd simply head for whatever was next on her list, this time the Mustangs of Las Colinas in Irving. It had made the top of the list because she'd been reading about the brilliant sculptor of the herd of wild horses running through a fountain cleverly designed to splash around their hooves. The man had died fairly recently, which had reminded her how much she loved both the sculptures and the entire concept. But the nearly five-hour drive

one way seemed a bit daunting at the moment, so she'd put it off.

Maybe she'd skip down the list to someplace closer. She'd been meaning to get to the French Legation historic site, at the outpost for the French diplomat Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, who first recommended that France recognize Texas as an independent nation. Opened as the legation in 1841, it was one of the oldest houses in Austin, and close enough that she could easily do it in a day and perhaps accomplish a couple of other tasks, too.

When she found herself wondering if Logan Fox had ever visited the place, she knew what her real problem was. She was trying to guess where he might be going this weekend.

So you can avoid him? Or see him again?

That she wasn't certain which was the right answer was the most unsettling thing of all.

She tried to focus on the bunch of essays she had yet to grade. She was about halfway through, and while there had been the usual array of results, from ho-hum efforts to surprisingly interesting takes on the assignment, she was, unusually for her, having trouble staying focused on the task. Her mind kept wanting to drift, and to a place she did not want to go.

Finally she resorted to self-bribery, telling herself if she got through this she could go into town and peruse the bookstore for anything new that reached out to her. That was a bigger temptation than just buying another e-book, because she could stop at Charpie for a slice of her absolute favorite dessert, their lemon meringue pie.

Although that peach cobbler is a very close second.

“Stop it,” she muttered out loud, irritated that her brain kept wanting to go there.

Eventually it worked—as the temptation of new reading material usually did—and she marked the last piece, a skillful intertwining of the assigned story with the student’s favorite superhero, in a clever way that made it work, with an A for content and approach, which she explained in a note of encouragement, and a B– for grammar, punctuation, and spelling. She added a second note telling him to keep his focus on the story for now, but eventually he was going to have to learn the nuts and bolts.

Then, the files saved and closed, she stood up and stretched before taking her now empty coffee mug out to the kitchen. She felt a little pang at the silence. It wasn’t just that the unit adjoining her half of the duplex was empty and quiet, awaiting new residents. It was that her place had seemed so much fuller, so much more...alive, when Jackson and Jeremy had been staying here. She hadn’t really realized until then just how quiet her life had become. But she was still certain it would have been worse had she stayed in their home, where the memory of David’s hearty laugh seemed to have become part of the walls, and where the images from his agonizing battle were etched into her mind as if with acid.

If she didn’t have this lifelong passion for history, if she hadn’t been determined to know as much about this state she now claimed as home as she had the one where she’d been born, she didn’t know how she would fill these weekends. But these treks she loved gave her a reason to look forward instead of ever backward, and that they had the capacity to completely distract her was a bonus.

The mug now in the dishwasher, she headed for her bedroom to change into something more suitable than the worn, comfy sweats she’d donned for this morning’s task. She went with her favorite jeans and a soft, blue cotton sweater that would be just right for this sunny spring day. So sunny, in fact, that as she headed for the garage she grabbed the sunglasses hanging on the rack near the door. And her

mood brightened correspondingly along the way, so that by the time she was walking through the door of the Last Stand bookstore, she was considerably more cheerful.

She stopped to chat for a few minutes with Lauren, the clerk working today, who happened to also be reading the same book she'd just finished.

“—is beginning to get on my nerves,” Lauren was saying about one of the main characters.

“Oh, she got on mine as well,” Tris agreed with a smile. “I kept yelling at her, ‘Wake up, you idiot!’”

“Exactly! But the hero’s pretty cool, the way he’s going after that crooked judge.”

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“Anybody who takes on scum like that is pretty cool in my view,” Tris said with a nod.

“I want to ask you how it ends, but I know you won’t tell me,” Lauren said, pretending to mope.

“Nope,” Tris said. “Although I could tell you and you’d still be surprised at how he does it.”

Lauren laughed, then waved her toward the new releases as the store phone rang and she had to go. Tris turned, scanning the small but well-stocked store, and wondered what she was in the mood for. And then her gaze stopped, locked, and for a moment she didn’t breathe. Of all the things she hadn’t expected... But there he was, barely a yard away, as tall and powerful as she remembered, a couple of books in his strong, long-fingered hands.

Logan Fox. Again.

And he was smiling as if he’d enjoyed her conversation with Lauren, which he couldn’t have helped but hear. Or more likely, at the idea of her, so educated in the classics and teaching English and composition, with a weakness for full-on thrillers. People did seem to find that amusing. But it was one of the many changes she’d made, trying to adjust her life so that every second that ticked off wasn’t a reminder of what she’d lost.

Wallowing in your misery, you mean?

“This one’s pretty good,” he said, picking up a new release from the table Lauren had aimed her at. She saw it was the newest from one of her regular authors to read, one who put layers upon layers, both in plot and character. “Had me guessing to the end.”

She laughed before she realized she was doing so. Maybe at the idea the quiet, often impassive man shared her taste in reading for fun?

“I love that about her work,” she said. “You’re stunned at who the villain is, but at the same time sitting there thinking ‘Of course, why didn’t I see it?’”

“Exactly,” he agreed, smiling again.

“I think I’d be a little afraid to meet her in person,” she said, unable, apparently, to stop smiling. “That devious mind!”

“I’d be watching my back,” he agreed, one corner of his mouth twitching upward.

Not for the first time Tris had the thought that that slight, crooked, one-corner smile was charming. And when they had checked out—he’d bought one of the thrillers she’d been considering, but also a nonfiction book that appeared to be about the King Ranch.

“Been there?” he asked when he saw her noticing the title as they went out the door.

“Not yet. It’s on the list, though.” And being the largest ranch in the entire country, it was near the top.

“It’s a longer trip,” he said, hitting on the exact reason it wasn’t in that number-one slot. “You could combine it with a run down to Brownsville. Ever heard of the Palmito Ranch Battlefield?”

“No.” Although the name rang a vague bell, it wasn’t enough, in her mind, to say yes. And that piqued her interest enough to make her ask, “Would you tell me about it?” She gestured across the street to the pie shop. “I’ll pay you in pie,” she said, smiling. “I was going anyway. I love their lemon meringue.”

He hesitated, giving her an odd but intent look, and it suddenly hit her he might be thinking this was some kind of...of pickup line or something. Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she started to turn away, muttering, “Sorry, I’m sure you have better things—”

“Cherry.”

She blinked, looked back at him. “What?”

“Cherry’s my favorite.”

About the color of my cheeks right now. She drew in a deep breath, steadied herself, and managed a smile. “Cherry it is.”

And so she found herself a few minutes later sitting across a small—almost too small—table in Char-pie, her slice of lemonmeringue in contrast to his bright cherry, an analogy she decided it would be best to stop right there.

The table really was small. Or maybe he was just so tall and broad it seemed that way, since she’d never noticed it before.

“So tell me about this battlefield,” she said rather hastily.

“Some say it was the last battle of the Civil War, although it happened over a month after the surrender at Appomattox.” His mouth quirked. “As it happened, the Confederates won. Thanks to Rip Ford.”

She swallowed her bite of pie before saying, “Rip Ford? As in the two-time senator, mayor of Austin, former Texas Ranger?”

He nodded. “He was the Confederate commander at Palmito Ranch. Ironical, that he won the battle weeks after his war was lost.”

“That’s why the name of the battle rang a bell,” she said, pleased to have the fuller story now.

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He gave her a considering look. “You did know?”

Did he think she’d said no just to...what? Get him to talk to her longer? She felt a bit of a churning in her stomach as she realized that she might well have, if she’d thought of it. But she shook her head. “Ringing a bell isn’t the same as knowing, to me. I know of him, of course, but not that specific battle. He accomplished so much else.”

“Know where he got the nickname ‘Rip’?”

She shook her head again. And had to acknowledge that this time she might have denied knowledge even if she had it, just because of the glint in those green eyes.

“When he served in the Mexican war, he started writing ‘rest in peace’ on his casualty lists, after every name of a soldier killed in battle.”

“I like that,” she said.

“He was an honorable man, even if he didn’t get here in time to fight in The Revolution.”

He spoke the last two words as if they were capitalized, and it made her smile again. “I’m definitely putting it on my list. For a weekender, obviously.”

“It’s pretty close to South Padre, if you wanted to combine it with an actual vacation.” He raised a brow at her. “You do get those, don’t you?”

She laughed, startling herself at how at ease she felt. “I haven’t even thought about

them for a while, but I may have to start.”

And if her imagination just plopped the two of them on a South Padre Island beach together, well, he didn’t need to know that.

Chapter Seven

“I think that’ll do it,” Logan said as he released the bay’s left front hoof. “If he continues to develop bruises, then you’ll need to have the vet take a look, but it looks like he’s just got thin soles, so any rocky terrain can cause problems for him.”

Richard Baylor nodded as the horse put the foot down, this time with more weight than he’d been willing to put on it before Logan had reshod him.

“I’ll make sure he rests a couple of days, then we’ll see,” the rancher said.

Logan bent to start putting away his tools, the rasp, clinchers, and the hoof tester that had shown him the bruise was just a bruise, not an abscess.

“Hey, Dad, Logan.” Nic Baylor’s voice came from behind him. She’d walked the slightly limping horse over from the therapy stables after he’d finished with the ranch horses. “Did we go with the thicker shoes?”

“Yes,” Richard answered his daughter. “Logan thinks it will do the trick.”

Logan straightened up as Nic answered, “Good,” patting the bay’s rump as she passed. “Thanks, Logan.”

“What does a thicker shoe do?”

Logan froze at the second female voice. That low, almost husky voice that made him

suddenly glad she hadn't arrived in the middle of the reshoeing. Who knows what he would have messed up. What was Tris doing here? She must be here visiting her brother and nephew. But then why was she here and not with them?

He was glad when Richard answered her question since he seemed incapable of speech at the moment.

"It ups his clearance, on rocky ground," the rancher said.

"Walnut here was always picking up stone bruises," Nic said, "after we'd take him anywhere outside a corral or pasture."

"So it's like raising up a truck so it doesn't hit rocks, for off-roading?" Tris asked.

Logan smiled despite his ridiculous nerves. "Exactly like that." There. He'd gotten that out all right.

"We can add some padding later if necessary," Richard said, "but I agree with Logan—this should do it."

"Good," Nic repeated. "He's a sweetheart with the kids."

"He's a sweetheart, period," Logan said, reaching out to rub the horse's outstretched muzzle. "Pleasure to work with."

"Who isn't, with you?" Nic said teasingly.

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It was all Logan could do not to look at Tris. It wasn't just that she apparently stunned him too much to speak normally, it was that he was stunned at himself. He couldn't remember ever reacting—or acting—this way around a woman before. He felt as if he were that awkward kid back in high school, too shy to initiate a conversation, and too shocked if anyone else tried to start one with him to really participate.

His thought about high school made him go suddenly still. Because it also made him remember that Tris was a teacher, an experienced one. Maybe that was all this was. She was using that experience to deal with him. Trying to draw him out. It made sense, more sense than the other paths his imagination wanted to careen down. She was going out of her way as he was certain she would with a withdrawn, shy, or awkward student.

Great. Thirty-six years old and you've got this gorgeous woman behaving as if you were half that.

“So,” Nic said, sounding as cheerful as she almost always did these days, no doubt thanks to Jackson Thorpe and his son, “where are you off to this weekend, Logan?”

It was all he could do not to look at Tris. “I...think up to Irving. The Mustangs of Las Colinas.” He gave a half-shrug. “The sculptor just died a while ago, so I kind of felt the urge.”

He heard a smothered sort of sound but was too distracted to look because Nic was gaping at him. “Wow, talk about being on the same wavelength. Tris just told me she was heading there this weekend, for that exact same reason.”

She looked over her shoulder at the woman who stood there, her auburn hair pulled back today but with a few strands loose around her face, strands he wanted to touch, so much that he had to curl his fingers against his palms to stop himself from reaching out to do just that.

“Well,” Nic went on, “no point in both of you making that long drive—you can go together.”

He guessed he knew now what that stifled sound had been. Tris had expected Nic to suggest just that. And was probably scrambling, mentally, to find a way out of it. But she was looking at him, with those deep blue eyes so like her famous brother’s, not uncomfortably but more...nervous? Why on earth would she be nervous?

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, she said, “I could drive. It would be good for my car. Too often I only do local stuff, short trips, and it’s a little rough on the battery life.”

He didn’t know what to say. So Nic wrapped it up for him, so quickly it was almost suspicious. “There you go, then. Take photos, both of you. I’ve never made it up there, slacker that I am on things historical.”

And then she was off to take the bay back to his stall at the therapy center. Thorpe’s Therapy Horses was, even after only a couple of months open, a going concern. He’d seen more than one article in high-profile publications about it, especially after Lily Highwater’s piece in *The Defender* had been picked up by a couple of, as Jackson called them, Hollywood rags.

Richard had vanished somewhere as well, leaving him to finish packing up his gear...and deal with Tris.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said hastily. “I know Nic kind of backed you into a

corner and—”

“I’d like to,” she said, and to his surprise she said it almost shyly. “And she’s right, there’s no sense in both of us driving separately.”

He sucked in some air. “I...no, there isn’t.”

He must have still sounded doubtful to her because she tilted her head and asked, “Do you mind my driving?”

“No,” he said quickly. “You wouldn’t want to ride in my truck that far anyway.”

She smiled. It was a lovely, kind smile that put him in mind of his earlier thought, that she was approaching this like a teacher with an awkward student. Which was how he should probably think of it as well. It wasn’t like she was flirting with him or coming onto him with the idea of a long drive together, to someplace where no one knew who they were.

Belatedly something else occurred to him. And it jolted him as sharply as a kick that landed from an unruly client. It was well over two hundred and fifty miles to Irving, a good four-to-five-hour drive, depending on how hard you were willing to push it. Add in a probable gas stop, and they were looking at at least ten hours just on the road. It was nothing to him. He’d roll out at five-ish, on the road by six, be there by eleven, spend a couple of hours, maybe twice that, and be home by eight. But that was him, alone, with no one else to take into consideration. And not everyone was happy with getting up and moving at that hour.

“I...were you planning on doing this in one day?” he finally asked.

“I was, yes,” she said, looking as if something similar had just occurred to her. “But I usually get an early start, so I can spend a couple of hours at least, and still get back

before it's too late in the evening." He stared at her as she recited practically an identical plan back to him. Then she gave an almost embarrassed half-shrug. "I used to be a late-nighter, but I got in the habit of early mornings with David, and now that seems to be normal to me. But if you—"

"No, no, that's fine." He said it hastily. There was no way he wanted to get into even the idea of making this an overnight trip. Not with her. He'd do something stupid for sure. "It's how I'd do it, too."

The memory of telling her about taking a weekend to go to the King Ranch and Brownsville, with a stay on South Padre, flashed through his mind, but that idea now—now that they were talking about a trip together—seemed so far beyond stupid he stomped it to dust the moment it appeared. It only took remembering a few things.

I got in the habit of early mornings with David.

That was what he should be focusing on. David Carhart. Her husband.

David was never less than ethical. Spoken with both love and respect.

He remembered her answer about vacations. I haven't even thought about them for a while. Because she'd been consumed with grief? Of course, he should have guessed that.

And suddenly the tension building in him eased. Because understanding had just solidified. She had been greatly in love with her late husband. By all indications, she still did love him. This wasn't a woman looking for...anything new. And she certainly wasn't foolish enough to look for it with the likes of him.

As long as he remembered that, as long as he kept that foremost in his mind, along with the simple fact that she was the sister of one of his larger, new clients, his boss

in a manner of speaking, and as long as he freaking chanted all this to himself if he had to, it would keep his suddenly reckless imagination in check.

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It had to. Otherwise he'd make the biggest mistake of his life, with the woman he least wanted to make it with.

Crossing a line she didn't want crossed.

Chapter Eight

"Don't be silly," Tris said when Logan suggested he would drive into town and meet her at her place. "You said your place was northeast of town, so it's practically on the way."

"But it's a few miles northeast of town," he said. He looked away when he added, "It's pretty isolated."

Because he wants it that way.

The thought came with such certainty she knew she was right. And she wondered if he didn't want anyone visiting him out there, or just her. Before she could dwell on that egocentric thought, he spoke again.

"Besides, if we're—" Did he stumble a little on that word, or was she imagining that part? "—leaving that early, you don't want to have to find your way out there in the dark. I'll just meet you at your place at six. Outside your place," he added quickly, as if he was reassuring her he didn't expect to be invited inside.

Or didn't want to be.

Mr. Logan Fox was indeed an enigma. An enigma she'd have several hours to chip away at tomorrow, if she wanted to. The question was, did she? She didn't really have any right to peck away at him, trying to get details out of him. And why would she? It wasn't like she was trying to get a handle on a new student. Just because she found him a bit...okay, fascinating, was no excuse to go poking into things he didn't want to talk about. Which seemed to be almost everything, other than horses and history.

She'd been used to David, who had never met a stranger in his life. Meet someone new and within an hour he had their kidshanging on him and an invitation to dinner at their house. But this man was the opposite, Nic had told her Logan had always been reserved, or as she put it, "a tough nut to crack." So, she wouldn't even try. He wasn't a student, nor was he a challenge she had to take on. Surely a couple of book and history buffs could keep a conversation going without veering into personal spaces.

Still, she had a restless night, waking every couple of hours and fighting to get back to sleep. It was going to be a long day, bookended by two long drives, and she needed to be alert.

"And preferably awake," she muttered to herself as she turned over and pounded her pillow into shape once more.

Although driving aside, how she could ever fall asleep in the close quarters of a vehicle with Logan Fox next to her, she didn't know. She couldn't deny the man was intriguing, but she wondered how much of it was that reserve of his, and a desire to, as Nic put it, crack it.

He's not a challenging student, nor does the trip have to be filled with meaningless chatter.

That lecture to herself delivered—bringing a laugh at the very thought of that man

indulging in meaningless chatter—she finally got back to sleep.

As was her wont she woke up two minutes before her alarm was set to go off. She sat up, rubbed at her eyes, double-checked the time and dismissed the alarm. She told herself she wasn't anxious, or nervous, and went about her morning routine, albeit today with the inside lights on since it was still dark. She started the coffee brewing, then headed back to the bathroom for her shower.

When she caught herself leaving her hair down, then pulling it up into a ponytail then letting it down loose again, she chastised herself silently. When she caught herself fussing over her makeup, using more mascara than she normally did, she stopped herself with a grimace. When she caught herself dithering over what to wear, when normally it would have been a simple choice, she gave herself a stern, mental lecture, in an exasperated tone.

“You’re being an idiot.”

That part came out loud, and it seemed to have been what she needed, because her focus sharpened and within ten minutes she was done and dressed, in the jeans and sweater she probably would have worn anyway, with her most comfortable sneakers, for walking. She hesitated, then, telling herself she'd have done it anyway, she added a light touch of her favorite gardenia-scented perfume.

She sipped at a mug of coffee while she double-checked what she called her excursion bag, a canvas multi-pocket tote that held whatever she might need, from water to snacks to a towel and Band-Aids. She slid the tablet she'd made sure to put on the charger last night into the outside pocket, in case she needed to look something up; sometimes she just wanted something bigger than her phone to look at. Then her notebook and pen—for these jaunts that generally involved history she went old-school—went into the pocket next to it, and she was ready for just about anything.

Except for nine or ten hours enclosed in a car with Logan Fox.

When he arrived, when she opened the door to him standing on her small front porch, taking up most of the space and so tall his hair nearly brushed the hanging light fixture, her compact SUV suddenly didn't seem big enough to hold him at all. He was wearing clean, nicely snug jeans—blue and newer than she usually saw him in, which she supposed meant no horses had been shod while wearing them—and a lighter blue button-down shirt, tucked in neatly behind a belt that, besides emphasizing his trim abdomen, had a buckle very appropriately in the shape of horseshoe.

No cowboy hat, she noticed, trying to remember if she'd ever seen him without it, other than when he was working with the forge and had sparks to worry about. Then he wore a baseball cap that bore the marks left by those sparks.

It took her only a moment to decide as much as she liked the cowboy style, she liked more being able to see his thick, dark brown hair, and how the lack of a brim to shadow his face made his eyes stand out all the more.

The open collar of the shirt drew her eye to the solid, muscled cords of his neck, and she could not help thinking that if she were looking, she'd be hard pressed to find a more attractive man than this one. But she was not looking. No, definitely not. But if she was...

"Good morning," she said hastily, wondering how long she'd been standing there gaping at him in awed silence.

"So far." His voice sounded early morning rough, like they were the first words he'd spoken. And perhaps they were—not everybody talked aloud to themselves as she did when trying to make sure she got her own point. But then he added, "And it just got better," and her pulse kicked into overdrive.

Luckily for her his expression changed instantly, clearly showing regret for having said it, and she was able to calm herself inwardly and ask casually, “Where did you have to park?”

“Up a block,” he said.

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“Will your truck be okay, with your equipment in it?”

He nodded. “Not much in there worth anything to anyone who doesn’t know how to use it. Plus I ran into Officer Stratton, and she said she’d keep an eye out.”

“Emily? You’re safe then. She’s great.”

“I get the feeling she takes offenses on her beat kind of personally.”

Tris laughed, suddenly feeling more relaxed. “Do you want to come in?”

There was a split second of hesitation before he said, “Not if you’re ready to go.”

“I am. Let me just grab my keys and bag.”

And so less than two minutes later, they were in her car and pulling out onto Honeysuckle Drive, then turned on Pecan to head for the Hickory Creek Spur. She’d been right, he filled that passenger space, but seemed comfortable enough once he’d moved the seat back. All the way back.

Once they were clear of town and on US290 headed for the interstate, the silence in the car somehow converted to pressure. Tris had thought herself silly last night for trying to think up things to say, but now she was glad of it.

“Have you been there since the renovation?” she asked.

Logan had been staring straight ahead, as if he’d never been on the 290 before, when

you had to be on it for some distance at least to get just about anywhere from Last Stand. He seemed almost startled at her words, and she wondered just where his mind had been. But then he looked at her.

“No, it’s been years.”

“Me, too. Which is silly, considering how much I love the work.”

“He was a genius honed by decades of dedication to his work,” he said.

Tris was delighted with the way he’d put it. “Yes, yes, he is. Was.” She sighed. “It’s always sad when that kind of talent leaves us.”

“You would know,” he said quietly.

Her breath jammed in her throat. She hadn’t expected that.

“I didn’t mean to—” he began, sounding sorry he’d said it.

“No, no, it’s nice to know people haven’t forgotten him.” It was true, but that didn’t mean she wanted to dwell on it here and now. “And I can’t imagine anyone who’s seen the mustangs forgetting Mr. Glen.”

“Or anybody who knows about his incredible life.”

She thought of the article she’d read just a few weeks ago. “Yes. Going from taxidermy to sculpture, ending up with work in the private collection of the Queen of England. Amazing.”

“And born in Kenya to Scottish parents, then an apprenticeship in Denver, back to Kenya for decades of work mostly living in a tent, and then dying in Ireland.”

She could have sworn she felt a change in him, even without looking. But when she did risk a glance, he wore an expression that was unmistakably amused. He caught her look, and smiled in an almost sheepish kind of way she found unexpectedly endearing.

“I guess we both did our homework.”

She couldn't help it—she laughed. Which, for her, was as unexpected as her reaction to that little smile.

Unexpected. There it was again.

She obviously needed to adjust her expectations.

Chapter Nine

The whole plaza looked tidier, newer, after the renovations and cleanup, including all of the tall buildings around it. Also a bit greener, Logan thought. Some of those trees were new.

But the centerpiece of Williams Square, Robert Glen's brilliant rendering of a small herd of mustangs on the run through a stream, was just as magnificent as ever. Half again bigger than the real creatures, he'd captured the movement and flow, from stallion to mare to frolicking foal, they practically vibrated with life, and that they were bronze didn't matter at all.

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And he felt surprisingly relaxed. Once they had gotten past the awkward moment about her late husband, the drive had been pleasant, and they'd found they had many things in common, from the love of reading and history to values. But he was glad they'd had that moment about David Carhart, because he'd needed the reminder again. He told himself he was just intrigued, that's all. Intrigued because they had so many similar interests, because despite what she'd been through she still had a sense of humor, and because they could practically finish each other's sentences.

But that's all it was.

He glanced at her now, liking the way she wanted to see every angle of the horses, the way the little one made her smile and the leader made her shake her head as if in awe, even the way she crouched down and tilted her head to look at the fountain structure that made the water splash around their hooves exactly as if they were real and racing across the stream.

Because that's the way you look at them? Because she'd lingered over the baby of the herd the same way you did?

He liked even more that she spent a long time simply appreciating, before she got out her phone and started taking the photos Nic had asked for. He left her to it, going back to his own perusal and enjoyment of the incredible little herd that seemed so alive to him. And fighting off the other thoughts that wanted to intrude.

Tris was, no doubt, an amazing woman. And not just beautiful. Being Jackson's sister, that was only to be expected, he supposed. But there was so much more to her, so much depth and inner beauty...

He shook his head sharply. Decisively. Because he had to believe her grief, the fact that she was one of his employers' sister, and the obvious fact that she still loved her husband, created enough of a barrier that he could spend time with her like this, enjoying their conversations. Because it would never turn into anything else.

Even if he wanted it to.

And that last sentence that formed in his mind nearly put him on his ass right there next to the edge of the fountain. He didn't want it to. He couldn't want it to. For so many reasons, not just the ones he'd just carefully gone through in his mind.

You've never pushed yourself on an uninterested or unwilling woman before, and you're not going to start now, Fox. You're no comparison to David Carhart anyway.

Besides, he was content with his life the way it was. It had taken him years to accept that this was what he liked, that solitude gave him comfort, and that whenever he spent time dealing with a lot of people, he needed time to recharge. There were a few exceptions, of course. He found that he could take being around the kids at the therapy riding center, maybe because he could almost feel their inner pain and turmoil and it overcame his natural reticence. And Nic, who had the best way with horses he'd ever seen, yet wasn't above calling him when something wasn't working. He didn't mind Jackson, either, because he admired the courage it had taken to do what he'd done, walk away from a career most in his business would kill for.

And Jackson's sister?

He couldn't just take being around her, he enjoyed it. A lot. He could actually talk to her, as he'd seen other people talk together.

Normally, you mean?

He smothered a sigh. His quirky personality had been both the bane and the bedrock of his life. He had resigned himself to it, to the way his brain worked and didn't work, and thought it would never change. Yet with Tris, he felt...different. As if it didn't matter that he wasn't a guy who could charm total strangers, unless they were the equine variety.

Not that he wanted to charm her. He thought he'd successfully built that wall. But he couldn't deny that even more than he liked being with her, he liked that she apparently liked being with him. Of course it was entirely possible he was reading her wrong. It certainly wouldn't be the first time he'd misread a woman. After all, he'd actually believed Gretchen had cared about him. And she—

His train of thought derailed abruptly as Tris came up to him and slipped a hand around his arm. "It's official," she said, grinning in that almost crooked way that charmed him.

He was almost afraid to ask. "It is?"

She nodded. "My stomach just growled so loudly it distracted me."

He relaxed. Hungry, he could deal with.

As long as it's for food.

He bit the inside of his lip, needed the sharp chastisement to rein in his unruly thoughts. "One of the places here?" he asked, knowing there were several eateries close by. "Or do you want to go someplace else?"

"Here's fine, and just might be close enough," she said, and he thought he heard the growl then. "I think some of the Cork and Pig's decadent mac 'n' cheese might just do it."

He smiled back at the mention of the tavern that was his usual stopping place. “I have a weakness for their barbecue chicken pizza.”

“We could share, then. I love that too,” she said.

Share. Love.

He had to shake off the odd feeling the words gave him, even in that innocent context. He tried to focus on how he’d expected her, in her lingering grief, to be quiet and grim most of the time. Yet she was smiling, laughing, enjoying. So his expectations obviously needed some work.

“Fair warning, I like the cilantro.”

Her smile widened. “That’s okay. I don’t have the soap gene.”

He somehow knew she would know about that, that those who had a quirk in the olfactory receptors strongly sensed the soapy aldehydes in the leaves of the herb that made the flavor—which was tasty to him—too strong for them to ignore.

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They walked the short distance to the corner the tavern was on in companionable silence. That too was strange for him, the lack of that overlay of awkwardness that he would usually have felt with someone so new to him. Especially someone like Tris.

The food lived up to his memory, and clearly Tris hadn't been kidding about the cilantro, she obviously savored even the heavy application he asked for. And in between bites they talked, about a little bit of everything, and he found himself wishing this casual meal could just go on and on.

An older couple, graying and just a bit slow-walking, passed by the window. He watched them go, feeling the same wistfulness he always felt, wondering what it must be like to be together for decades, to have such a bond with that one person that it withstood...everything. What it must be like for the one person you had to have in your life also had to have you. What it must be—

“Hey, Hephaestus, where did you go off to?” He blinked and snapped back to the present. She was giving him that grin again, and he was very much afraid he was gaping at her. “I meant that name in the blacksmith sense, of course.”

He scrambled to get back in the game. It obviously did not pay to let his mind wander around this woman. “And here I thought you were calling me a Greek god.”

“Well,” she said, looking exaggeratedly thoughtful, “that would fit too. But the lame part, definitely not. Not with those legs.”

He had no idea what to say to that, so he tried for something she would interpret as an answer to her question, rather than the truth that he'd been sitting here stupidly

musings about lifelong connections. “I was just wondering if you’ve ever seen the mustangs at night, when they light it up from below.”

“No, I haven’t. I didn’t realize they did.”

“It’s really something. Gives it a whole different feel, almost makes them look even more real, yet at the same time almost eerie. And with lights on in the buildings around the square, the whole thing is like a crashing blend of then and now.”

She was staring at him so intently it was making him edgy. “Have you always had this amazing talent for summarizing something so perfectly in so few words?”

He had no idea what to say to that, either. It was strange that while he often chose not to speak, he usually had the words in his head. And here she was, on an occasion where he’d actually gotten them out, calling it a talent. But there didn’t seem to be any words in his mind at all at the moment. None that would form a response to what she’d said, anyway.

Finally he just muttered his go-to excuse. “Less I say, less chance to mess up.”

“I’d say it’s more that you just cut to the chase.”

The smile she gave him then melted away the tension inside him. Tension she’d built, without even trying. And the easing of that tension enabled him to say, almost casually, “We could hang around until the lights come on, so you could see it. We’d be late getting home, but...”

“It would be worth it? I think you’re probably right.” The smile widened. “And anyway, that’s what weekends are for, isn’t it?”

Logan sank back in his chair, a little stunned both at what he’d done and how she’d

answered. And that he'd actually committed himself to spending even more hours with her.

Until dark. Dark, when other urges crept in.

He gave himself a mental shake and shored up that wall he'd been so proud of, that wall built of her grief, her being his boss's sister, and the immutable fact that she still loved her late husband.

He wondered if he would be able to keep that wall standing long enough.

Chapter Ten

Tris knew she would carry the image in her mind forever. Those bronze horses galloping through that water, all nine of them lit from below, giving them an eerie sort of glow as if they were truly racing across a Texas plain in moonlight, yet in the middle of this urban center. It was exactly what Logan had said. A crashing blend of then and now.

He did, even if he apparently didn't quite believe it, have a way with words, especially with description. It made her wonder, not for the first time, what exactly he said to those intractable horses he was called to deal with. But she suspected it was not what he said, even if it was a command the animal had heard before, but the way he said it that worked the miracle. Probably in that low, rumbling voice that told the creatures this being should be listened to. It certainly made her want to sit up and listen. Made her want to hear more of it.

And so when, much later than they'd originally planned, they got back in her car for the hours-long drive home, she used the hour as an excuse and announced since it was going to be a long, late drive in the dark, it was up to him to keep her awake and alert.

“Pretty sure that’s a radio of some sort,” he said, nodding toward the dash. “Bet you even have one of those newfangled streaming services connected.”

She smiled wryly. “The only thing that will keep me awake there is the news, and I want to be alert, not furious.”

He laughed. It was low, rough, and short, but definitely a laugh, and in the intimate darkness of her vehicle, it sent a ripple of warmth through her. “Hard to avoid, these days.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. Then she said something she thought would be comfortable enough for them both. “I’ve been thinking I should bring Jeremy on some of these expeditions. So he can learn a bit more about Texas, and the history. Any suggestions, for a kid his age?”

It was odd how she could tell the difference between when he was silent because he didn’t know what to say and when he was thinking about what to say. This was the latter, so she let the silence ride. And after a minute or two, he gave her the results of those thoughts.

“His age, I’d maybe start with the Apollo Mission Control Center, in Houston. Seeing the old gear they did it with is kind of fascinating.”

“Good idea,” she said, wondering why she hadn’t thought of that herself. “Maybe we’ll watch some of the documentaries first.”

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“I’d go with the movie on Apollo13,” he said. “Then ask him if he’d like to see where they did it for real.”

“Perfect,” she exclaimed.

“And as long as you’re already in Houston,” he said, sounding now as if he were on a roll, “you might as well slide down to Galveston and see the other extreme, the Elissa.”

“That’s the tall ship, isn’t it? The one they designated the official tall ship of Texas?”

“She is. A three-masted barque. One of the oldest still sailing, launched in 1877.”

“That would be a fascinating jump, from going to the moon to traveling the high seas with only sail power.” She found it fascinating anyway. And she thought Jeremy was curious enough about his new home to be too. “I’ll talk to Jackson, see what he thinks, but I’m sure he’ll be all for it.”

She bit her lip to stop her next words, which would have been, “We could all go together.”

And the entire rest of the drive back to Last Stand, the words and her urge to say them hovered in the back of her mind, as she wondered what had brought that urge on.

*

Silence, it seemed, did not bother her.

As a semi ahead of them let out a short blast on his air horn Logan snapped out of a reverie built of a series of images of today playing back in his mind. He didn't know how long he'd been drifting, but she hadn't said anything so he hoped it wasn't too long. He focused on the road signs, the next one telling him they were nearing Temple, and he thought he'd tuned out about Waco, so not too bad.

"Welcome back."

Her tone wasn't critical, it wasn't even amused, as some people got when he zoned out like that. It was an odd habit he'd had all his life, whenever he wasn't actually working on something, he could get so absorbed in what was going on inside his head that he was barely a part of what was happening in front of him. The few that knew him well were used to it. They recognized that distant expression he apparently took on, and often used a whistle or snap of the fingers to bring him out of it.

Which brought up the question of how Tris had even known he'd been...gone? They were sitting here in the dimly lit interior of her car. She was focused on the road, not him. So how had she not only known that he'd slipped into that mode, but also when he'd snapped out of it?

He shot her a sideways look, and she smiled. That, at least, he could explain—she had seen his head turn.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Sometimes I get..." He trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

"So do I," she said, her tone matching the smile. "Ever have those times when you're heading somewhere and arrive without a memory of how you got there, because some part of your brain's handling those things automatically, leaving another part to play

with that thought you just had, or that thing you just remembered?”

It took him a moment to get past her perfect description of how it worked, for him at least. “All the time,” he finally said.

“I can’t decide if it’s a knack or a curse,” she said lightly.

He was staring at her now. Her profile seemed almost backlit by the various lights they passed, and the oncoming headlights. He thought of that day, of the high school unveiling. He barely remembered the architect, because he’d been so taken by the way Tris had been looking at the man beside her. And he’d wondered again if Carhart knew just how lucky he was.

Yeah, so lucky cancer ate him up a few years later.

And here he was, in a car with the man’s widow, driving through the dark, trying not to dwell on the simple fact of how much he liked her. But at least liking her was okay. He could be friends with her, couldn’t he, as long as he remembered he had no business and no right to be thinking of her any other way?

“Thanks for going with me today,” she said, reminding him he’d yet again let silence take over. “It was a wonderful day, and your take on everything was a big part of that.”

Feeling inordinately pleased at the compliment, he was glad the car was barely lit. “I didn’t mean to launch into the mechanics and methods of working with bronze,” he said, a little embarrassed at the memory of what had turned into almost a classroom-style lecture. But he’d studied a bit about the process, interested in what was, in a way, directly related to his own much more utilitarian metalwork.

“I asked,” she pointed out. “And I learned and enjoyed. For me, that’s a darned near

perfect day.”

Before he could stop himself he’d murmured, “It was that.”

“I’m glad,” she said, almost as softly.

And he sat there in the dark as they drove on toward home, the small Texas town beloved by both of them, wishing he had the nerve to suggest they do this again. Soon.

But it was better for both of them if he just kept his mouth shut, for all the reasons he already knew, and probably a few more he didn’t. Because despite the mental wall he’d built, despite all the valid reasons he’d come up with for reining in his unexpected reaction to her, he couldn’t deny one simple fact. When he was with her, all his reasoning took off like a stampeding herd of horses, and the wall he’d so carefully built started to crumble. And no matter how many times he told himself he had no right, that she still loved her late husband, he couldn’t seem to stop it.

So the obvious solution was to stay away. If you can’t have it but can’t resist it, don’t be around it.

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Concise words from one of his many foster fathers, delivered about a family friend who had a problem with alcohol, came back to him sharply now. Mr. Gordan had been one of the better ones. Tough, but fair. And usually right. He'd dared to hope he might be able to stay with that family, but he'd been moved yet again when Mrs. Gordan had gotten sick.

He didn't want to think about it, about never seeing Tris again, but maybe it was the only way. Of course there was always the chance he'd run into her at her brother's place, but if he was careful to go when school was normally in session, it should be all right. Yesterday's encounter, which had led to today, had been purely coincidence after all.

He spent a lot of the rest of the drive home wondering why the hell this part of him, asleep and ignored ever since the reality of Gretchen's "love" for him had punched him in the gut, had awakened now. Awakened only for this woman.

This woman who was not for him.

He'd best heed that long-ago advice.

Chapter Eleven

"So how'd your trip to Irving go yesterday?"

The moment Nic spoke, Tris realized she should have been prepared. Nic had been the one, after all, who had maneuvered them into that joint expedition. From where they were seated on a bale of hay, she carefully kept her eyes on her brother and

nephew. They had Pie in the wash rack, giving the pinto pony a bath and getting themselves soaked in the process. But they were laughing, both of them, and it was a sight and sound she would never tire of. Not after what they'd been through. It eased the tangled restlessness she was feeling and hadn't yet had time to sort out and analyze.

"It was very nice," she answered, although nice wasn't exactly the word for it. "The sculpture is amazing, beautiful, and so alive with the fountain imitating the splash of their hooves in the water. And the contrast of the horses and where it's set is fascinating."

"Spoken like a true teacher," Nic said with a laugh. "How was Logan?"

Ah, there it was. "Educational," she said, neutrally.

Nic practically gaped at her. "You spend an entire, very long day with one of the hottest, sexiest guys in Last Stand, and that's what you call it?"

"It was," she insisted, trying to ignore how Nic had described him. "He knows so much about it, not just the history and the meaning of it, but because he works with metal a lot he had insight on the making of the sculptures." Her mouth quirked. "Although he said he's limited to more practical applications."

"He would," Nic said. "Did you know he designed and helped Dad build my mom's desk? And the ramp, so she could get off the front porch?"

Tris turned her head to look at her friend—and, she suspected, eventual sister-in-law—in surprise. "No, I didn't."

"He custom-made the metal parts and braces so they'd fit in those specific spots. They'll last forever, thanks to him. And he did the drawer pulls too, handmade."

Tris remembered the handles on the drawers of Barbara Baylor's desk, an intricate twist of silver metal that was both decorative and easy to grasp. She'd had no idea they'd been handmade by the local blacksmith, however.

"I'm not surprised," she said, her voice softer now. "He has...depth."

"Yes, he does. He had a rough start, but he's overcome most of that and made a good life. And gained the kind of depth that makes sure you'd never be bored around him."

She wanted to ask what she meant by a rough start, but now another thought consumed her mind, and she shifted her gaze to Nic's face. "Is that why you cornered us into making that trip together?"

"Moi?" Nic asked, widening her eyes as if shocked, just a bit too exaggeratedly. Then she laughed, admitting it. "I just thought you two might get along. When Jackson told me about your frequent trips to historical sites, Logan was the first person I thought of, so when the opportunity arose..." She shrugged.

"I see."

Tris studied the other woman for a long, silent moment, long enough to make Nic apparently uncomfortable. "I wasn't trying to set you up or anything, really. I mean, I know you're a very educated, brilliant teacher and he's just a blacksmith, after all—"

Tris's temper sparked. "Just? He does a job this town desperately needs, and does it brilliantly and generously. Ontop of that he's magical with difficult horses—you've said that yourself. And on top of that he's the most well-read and knowledgeable person I've met in all of Last Stand, and—"

She cut herself off abruptly when she realized Nic was grinning at her. "I know. And I knew you'd know."

“Then why did you say that?”

Nic’s grin shifted to a rather sad, rueful expression. “I don’t know the details, but he was burned pretty bad by some snooty East Coast transplant who faked being crazy about him. Mom thinks she was only using him to show her wealthy friends how egalitarian she’d become.”

Tris stared at her. “That’s...” She couldn’t think of a word disgusting enough.

“Yeah,” Nic agreed. “He’s a good man, Tris. He’ll never be a social butterfly—”

“Who wants one of those?” Tris said sharply. “I’d rather a man with depth any day.”

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And it wasn't until Nic's smile widened once more that she realized she'd practically admitted out loud feelings she hadn't even really admitted to herself.

Driven by a sort of discomfort she'd never felt before, that afternoon she drove out to the cemetery. She didn't make a habit of visiting David's grave. For her, he wasn't there. If she wanted the feel of his spirit she went to the school, and walked around those buildings he'd designed and redesigned. That was where she had the feel of him the most.

She hadn't done that in a while, she realized now. She hadn't gone for a couple of months before Jackson and Jeremy had arrived, and she certainly hadn't gone since they had gotten here four months ago.

Six months. She'd never gone that long without visiting that place. It felt almost disrespectful. Like she didn't love him anymore because she didn't need that feeling of being close to him. But she did love him, she would always love him. She knew that, down deep. So why then was her urge today to go to the cemetery? She didn't know, but she wasn't going to fight it.

It hadn't changed. It was the same quiet, peaceful place it had always been, tucked back between two rises, a quarter mile or so short of the end of this remote drive, where the local shooting range, Lock and Load, was. She couldn't help thinking of the old, Last Stand ingrained joke about picking that location because the noise wouldn't bother the neighbors.

She had to focus to find her way, which was odd. She would have thought it would be etched into her memory as if with acid, but she had to think about exactly where his

grave was. She supposed that was because this wasn't where she came to find him.

When she got there, she found a couple of bundles of roses resting against his headstone, one wilted and ready to be disposed of, but one fresher. It did her heart good to realize he was remembered by others in Last Stand, too. She found herself smiling as she mentally greeted the man who had meant so much to her. She knelt down and placed the single large, bright sunflower she'd picked, in acknowledgment of his favorite flower. Useful, he'd always said, being a fan of the seeds. She herself had always preferred the bluebonnets, the symbols of this state she'd come to love so much. She loved the color and shape of them, and the way they exploded to life and carpeted the hills with color every spring.

As usual, however, she didn't feel David's presence as she looked at the stone with his name and those dates that were painfully too close together. So she still wasn't sure why she'd felt so drawn to this place today. Maybe it was because she knew that ceremony was coming up in a few weeks, the ten-year anniversary of the unveiling of the remodel of Creekbend High School. David's project, which had won both the town's appreciation and approval and awards both state and national. She appreciated that they wanted to honor both the project and him, but they'd asked her to speak and she was not looking forward to being the center of attention.

With a sigh she finally stood up. This place was so...serene, which she supposed was appropriate. She had, even before David had died, spent time here. In the original section, where the oldest gravesites were, including those of the people who had fallen in the actual Last Stand. Asa Fuhrmann, the man commemorated with the statue in front of the library for his run for ammunition that had saved so many lives but cost him his own, was buried here, his elevated tombstone visible from almost anywhere in the cemetery. Those who survived the battle and stayed were there too, along with other names familiar to anyone who knew Last Stand history.

Out of respect, she always walked through that original section whenever she was

here. There was something about the names, and the nearly two-centuries-old markers, that stirred her love of history when she did. Some even made her smile, like that of Jess Highwater, who had stayed and helped establish Last Stand after the battle and ended up owning the saloon, which had occurred when the man who had built it had given it to him with his dying breath. That Jess was the ancestor of both the current proprietor of that same saloon and the current police chief—there had been a Highwater in each profession since that long-ago day—was what amused her, in a delighted, Last Standian sort of way. And she was pretty sure Jess Highwater would be proud of them all.

Her amusement faded when she stepped to the next stone, that of Steven Highwater, whose accidental death had been such a tragedy for the current Highwater family. It had torn them apart, in more ways than one. But they had, in the end, triumphed, and Last Stand was lucky to have them.

A sudden prickling at the back of her neck had her thinking of every story she'd ever read of the haunting of a graveyard, even though she believed in none of it. Still, automatically, she turned her head to look.

While most of her felt a jolt, some part of her wasn't surprised at all to see Logan standing a few yards away, near Asa Fuhrmann's marker. For what seemed like a ridiculously long moment they both simply stood there, looking at each other. Neither of them made a move to close the distance between them, as if they were two strangers whose gazes happened to lock rather than two...acquaintances who had enjoyed a delightful excursion just yesterday.

As she looked at him standing there, tall, strong, quiet, respectful with hat in hand, what Nic had told her about that old girlfriend seared through her mind. What a fool that woman was, not to see the pure, quiet value in this man.

She didn't know what he was thinking as they both stood motionless, but suddenly it

was too much, and she started toward him. Almost in the same instant he took a step as well, looking as if he were fighting the urge.

“Nice morning for a visit.” She groaned inwardly even as she said it. The weather? Really?

“I have...a friend buried here. So I usually stop by on Sundays, after the range.”

She hadn’t realized he was a regular at Lock and Load. “How’s Mike?” she asked, knowing the range master, an amiable older veteran, had had some mobility problems lately.

“Better. He’s trying some newer medication that’s easier on his gut, and things are improving.”

She smiled. “No doubt better for him than the handful of aspirin I saw him take one day.”

“Yes. I’m glad he’s got Scott to help now, though.”

She nodded. Scott Parrish was another remarkable Last Stand story, a veteran himself who had opted into the military in lieu of punishment when he’d gotten into trouble—understandable trouble, she’d always thought—as a kid. He’d straightened his life out and come back to both confront the cause of it, his own family, and eventually claim the girl he’d left behind, young Sage Highwater.

Silence fell then, and unlike herself she felt the need to fill it. “I didn’t know you came to the range. I’ve always thought the neighboring locations interesting. It adds a sort of...solemnity to both, I guess.”

He shrugged. “The people lying here fought and died to start this town. I sort of feel

it's up to us to be ready to do the same to protect it.”

Leave it to this man to put it in a way she hadn't quite thought of. She looked at him for a moment. Remembered what Nic had told her. And said quietly, “And they would be proud to have a man like you stand as they stood.”

He'd been looking at Asa's stone again, but at her words his gaze shot back to her face. He looked a little shocked, but then a slow smile started, and she suddenly felt as if it were the height of summer, not the first week of May. Warmth flooded her at the sight of that smile, and she only now realized that she'd thought she'd imagined the effect it had on her.

She hadn't.

Chapter Twelve

He should have known. It was a quiet Sunday, her husband was buried here—he shouldn't have been at all surprised she had come here. She certainly loved her husband enough to do so, even after several years. And, knowing what he now knew about her, he shouldn't have been surprised that she'd pay a visit to the old guard, as he thought of them, before she left.

Maybe she came here every Sunday, and he'd just missed her before. Because this was his routine, a stop at the range—after a stop at Kolaches Bakery in town for Mike's favorite cinnamon rolls—a practice session, then some coffee with Mike and Scott, then, on his way back to his isolated, quiet house, a stop here to visit the cemetery. More than once he'd been told it was a morbid habit, but he thought of it as a historical one, since he had no blood family buried here. Or anywhere else, for that matter, that he knew of.

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No family that had wanted him, anyway.

But Bud was here, and that was enough. Bud Dailey, the man who had, in essence saved him. Who'd given him a path, and the training to walk it. And who, in the end, had given him more than any blood family could have, a life he actually wanted to live.

But none of this explained why or how he'd known that the person he could see in the distance, far from where he'd parked, that slender woman in the long shirt over those leg-hugging things that made his pulse kick up, that woman who was too far away for him to see her face, was Tris.

Yet he had known. Been certain.

He'd known in time to leave without being seen. In time to avoid any contact with her at all. But he'd come over here anyway.

He was noticing a definite theme. Whenever Trista Thorpe Carhart was around his logic, common sense, and self-control seemed to vanish. And not necessarily in that order.

But even noticing that, he hadn't been able to stop himself when she'd started toward him. As if he'd been roped by some rodeo star, he'd done the same, moved toward that vision up ahead, with her burnished hair and those bottomless blue eyes made so famous by her brother.

And he was thankful she had spoken first, even if it was about the weather, since

opening words were apparently not a menu choice for him today. With her, anyway.

And they would be proud to have a man like you stand as they stood.

She'd stunned him speechless with that one. But he couldn't help smiling. That anybody thought that of him was a prize, for Tris to not only think it but say it was a treasure.

The feeling that gave him enabled him to ask, "Do you always come back here to the originals, when you're here?"

Her eyes widened as she looked at him. "That's exactly what I call this, the originals section."

Of course you do. He chalked up yet another instance of them thinking almost exactly alike. Maybe someday it wouldn't totally disconcert him.

Quit thinking like this is going to continue. It can't. And the reason why is buried here in this cemetery.

"Do you...feel better, after you've visited him here?" He didn't clarify who he meant, knew he didn't have to.

"Not really," she said. "If I want to feel close to him, I go to the school. It's like he's in every wall of the new section. So, I don't come here very often." She gave him an odd look. "I'm not really sure why I felt I needed to come today. But I did. And here you are."

He drew back slightly. She'd said that as if she'd expected him to be here. Or at least, like she'd thought he might be. But she had no way of knowing this was a regular stop for him—it had never come up. They'd talked about many things, but certainly

not visiting the Last Stand cemetery.

Surely she must have just been referring to the coincidence of them once again being in the same place at the same time. That explanation calmed him a bit, but then she blew that to bits.

“I was going to stop at Java Time on the way back home. Care to join me?”

No. No, I can't. Shouldn't. Won't.

What came out was, “I'd like that.”

And so he found himself, a bare fifteen minutes later, sitting in the local coffee shop drinking the strongest black they had while Tris sipped on a creamy, frothy thing that looked more like a dessert than the caffeine deliverance system coffee was to him. So they weren't alike in everything.

He should be relieved by that, but he was too tangled up in realizing he'd apparently been tracking the ways in which they were alike.

Feeling a little like a wary horse who wasn't sure just how scared he should be of this new, big thing that seemed to be closing in on him, he watched her take a long sip of her warm drink before he spoke.

“Planned your next excursion yet?” So I can be sure to be elsewhere...

She gave him a delighted smile. “I talked to Jackson, and he loved the idea of taking Jeremy to the Apollo Mission Control Center. He may even go himself, if we can keep it quiet.”

That shook him out of his self-centered thoughts. What must it be like, to have to

even think like that? Wonder if you could or should go somewhere with your own sister and son, because your presence might cause an uproar?

“You should come with us, since it was your idea.”

He managed not to choke on his swallow of coffee. Barely. “I...no, it’s your family. You don’t want a stranger horning in.”

“Stranger? You’re not a stranger, Logan. To Jackson, to Jeremy, to any of us.” She gave him a long, steady look that was somehow unsettling. “Nor,” she added softly, “are you strange.”

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As clearly as a photograph the memory snapped into his mind, of the day he'd admitted some people found his fascination with the past strange. He'd felt safe saying it to her, knowing she had a bit of that herself.

You know what they say about people who don't learn from history...

Yeah, they're destined to repeat it. And the first thought that barreled into his head now was that his history with women he dared to let himself care about was not something he wanted to repeat. Ever.

Not even with a woman who seemed to already know him well enough to guess what that "Nor are you strange" statement would mean to him.

By a few days later, he'd successfully put the tempting offer to accompany them out of his mind. But the moment he realized he'd made a promise to go back and recheck the Baylor horse with the flat foot problem and make sure the raised shoe was working, it all came roaring back. Even if he didn't see Jeremy, he'd know the boy, Tris's nephew, was there, and that was all it took.

But a promise was a promise, so he loaded up what he'd need if it turned out the animal needed the extra padding he and Richard had talked about and headed out there.

The horse was doing fine, and he thought he was going to skate when Jeremy bolted out the front door of the main house and ran toward him. A large golden retriever bounded along behind him. He remembered hearing something about the dog having belonged to a friend of Chance Rafferty, and that the animal had tracked Jeremy

down when he'd been lost in that thunderstorm.

"Mr. Logan! Are you coming with us this weekend? It's going to be so cool, and Aunt Tris said it was all your idea, and even Dad's going to come, but you know how to get there so you have to come, right?"

He'd swear the boy hadn't even taken a breath during the outpouring. He tried to think of a way out that wouldn't dull the child's enthusiasm. "It's going to be a family thing, Jeremy. I'm not family."

"Neither's Uncle T, but he'd come. Dad says the family you build yourself is better sometimes. Except for Aunt Tris, a'course."

The family you choose. So much for those who thought all actors lived only on the surface, pretending in life as they did in front of a camera. Just as with his sister, there was wisdom in Jackson Thorpe.

On the thought he heard the familiar voice from behind him. "He's right, you know," Jackson said. "It was your idea, and a good one, so you should come." He reached out and tousled his son's hair. "Besides, then the adults will really outnumber this guy, and that's a good thing."

"Aw, Dad," Jeremy protested, but he was grinning almost proudly.

Logan had only seen the boy a couple of times back when they'd first abandoned Hollywood for the Hill Country. But now he saw him more often, and the change was obvious, even to him. Obvious, and remarkable.

"Tell him he has to come," Jeremy ordered his father. Then, "C'mon, Maverick, let's go!"

Boy and dog took off at a run, headed into the barn, no doubt toward Pie. The pony was still Jeremy's favorite animal on the ranch, although Logan guessed the dog had already tied him in the boy's affections.

"You heard him," Jackson said, and Logan's head snapped around to look at the famous face. He'd never been an avid TV watcher, preferring to read, but he'd watched a bit of Stonewall over the years it had been on. Enough that it struck him odd to be standing here looking at that face in person instead of on screen. And he remembered Nic's disdain for the show and, as she called it, Hollywood fakery. And yet here stood the star, on her ranch, and from what he could tell solidly and probably permanently in her life.

Just proves you know jack about it, Fox.

"—like your idea of going from there to the tall ship, so it'll be a long day."

Logan blinked, tuned back in. "All in one day, yes, it'd be full."

"It would help if you can drive once we hit Houston. Nic hates driving in cities, and I'm clueless there. GPS can only help so much, and it's a pain in traffic in an unfamiliar place. So, thanks."

Nic. He should have realized she'd be coming. The two of them were rarely apart for long these days from what he'd heard. And seen. Did that mean Tris wasn't coming along? Despite her enthusiasm for the idea?

Belatedly, because of his distraction about Tris, he realized Jackson had said thanks. As if it were a done deal. Had he somewhere along the line, without realizing it, said yes?

"—and we'll cover all the fees, so don't worry about that. And you should probably

have my phone number, and vice versa,” Jackson was saying now.

“I...sure,” Logan said, not sure either how he’d gotten into this or how to get out. His mouth quirked wryly as he thought of all the people out there, mostly women, who would love to have this man’s phone number.

Numbers exchanged, Jackson nodded. “I’ll let you know if anything changes. We’ll all meet up and leave from here in our full-sized SUV, so since her place is closer to yours than we are, Tris will come pick you up.”

Tris will come pick you up.

Now he’d done it.

Chapter Thirteen

Tris had been yawning since she’d gotten up, going through her regular morning routine despite the fact that it was two hours earlier than she usually got moving, especially on a weekend.

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And then, belatedly in her sleepy state, it registered in her brain why she was up, and she jolted fully awake.

She had to go pick up Logan.

She grimaced as she finished with the hair dryer. She didn't think she'd imagined the reluctance in Logan's voice when her brother had put him on the phone to give her directions to his place. She just didn't know exactly what caused it—an aversion to taking this trip in general, despite it being his idea, or an aversion to spending another day...with her.

She'd thought they'd gotten along very well that day in San Antonio, and even better when they'd gone to see the mustangs. Yet he'd sounded on the phone as if this were the last thing in the world he wanted to do, and she didn't know why. She knew he liked Jeremy, and Nic was an old friend. Did he have some kind of antipathy toward Jackson? He'd spoken of him neutrally at first, then with more respect and even liking as he got to know him, especially after they'd started Thorpe Therapy Horses. At least, she thought he had.

She rinsed out her mug after her second cup of coffee, taking note of the clock and that she needed to leave in five minutes. That's when it occurred to her, given how often she'd heard him referred to as a loner, that maybe even their little group of five felt like too much to him. She had a bit of that tendency herself, and had frequently had students like that, who did great one-on-one, but hated being on a team or in a group. If Logan was introverted by nature, this excursion with a car full of people might be something he'd normally avoid. She herself would have second thoughts if it wasn't family.

Or maybe he just didn't want to make this trip again, period. It was going to be a very long day, after all. And she gathered from what Jackson had said that he'd kind of gotten roped into it by Jeremy.

Now that would fit, that he would agree to this simply to not disappoint the boy. In which case they would all just have to see to it that he had a good time. Despite himself, if necessary. She'd have to tell Jeremy to make sure and direct all his questions—and he would have them, he always did—to Logan, since he knew the most about where they were going. Even if she herself had spent some time reading up on their destinations.

Jackson had wanted to leave by six since it was indeed going to be a long day. Logan said his place was about halfway between town and the Baylor ranch, but a fifteen-minute drive off the main road, the Hickory Creek Spur, so she calculated she'd need the regular twenty minutes it took to get to the ranch plus a half hour to get to Logan's and then back to the spur. Add an extra ten minutes just in case, plus another ten for them to all get loaded up in Jackson's vehicle, and she was headed out of her driveway into the pitch-dark of 4:50AM. As before, Logan hadn't been happy about her trekking out here in the dark, but Jackson was a hard man to say no to.

He'd told her there was no road sign since his place wasn't officially on a road. It was in essence a very, very long driveway, he'd said rather wryly. But after five minutes of negotiating the rough-textured gravel drive in the dark of predawn, without seeing a single building or light even in the distance, she was beginning to wonder if she'd found the right turnoff. He'd said there was a big oak tree right at the corner, and she'd seen one, but maybe there were others? He'd said his place was kind of isolated, but this was a bit extreme.

She was about to stop and go for her phone when the drive made a fairly sharp right turn and began to climb slightly. And she realized she'd been looking at road level when she should have been looking up. Because at the top of the rise was a

rectangular building with a couple of large, lighted windows and a long covered porch that appeared to run the length of the front.

She let out a relieved breath and finished the turn. She saw the now familiar truck parked in a covered port next to what looked like a large workshop of sorts, several yards to the right of the house. She wasn't quite sure where to stop, but the driveway, as he called it, seemed to run from where she was all the way to the workshop, so she simply stopped in front of the short flight of stairs that went up to the porch.

Almost as soon as she did the lights in the house went out, plunging everything into darkness. It took a moment before her eyes adjusted and she could see the tall figure on the porch, just in time to see him reach out to test the doorknob. Then he was down the steps before she even came to a full stop, and she had the strangest feeling he wanted to be sure there was no reason for her to come inside.

That thought almost made her smile. Did he live in bachelor messiness, was the place so untidy he didn't want her to see it? She found it hard to believe that he lived that way, and even harder to believe that he'd care if she saw it if he did. Because she wouldn't care. It was his home; he could live however he wanted.

Maybe he just doesn't want you in his space.

That, she decided, was much more likely. He hadn't wanted to be in her space, either, that day he'd come to her place.

And then he was at the passenger door, pulling it open and sliding his lean, strong frame into the seat. She hadn't moved the seat from when he'd sat there before, even though it felt a little odd to have so much foot room over there.

"You found it. Obviously."

“It was questionable there for a minute or two,” she admitted.

That seemed to break the ice and she relaxed a little. At least, as much as she could with this rather spectacular specimen of manhood sitting so close.

“You weren’t kidding when you said your place was a little isolated.”

“I like it that way.”

He said it as if he’d had to explain it a hundred times before. And maybe he had.

“The quiet? Or the lack of close neighbors?”

“Yes.”

“Quiet it is, then,” she said, stung a little by the short, flat answer. She wasn’t exactly a morning person anyway. She didn’t need to add forcing conversation on someone who clearly didn’t want it.

She heard him let out a breath. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m a little…”

His voice trailed away. She gave him a sideways glance but couldn’t see much in the darkness, plus she didn’t dare take her eyes off the drive ahead for more than a second, at least until they were back on an actual road. So she took a guess.

“My brother said you pretty much got roped into this by Jeremy. Thank you for not saying no to him.”

She could almost feel him looking at her now. And this time he let out a low, short chuckle. “He’s hard to say no to. Especially when I remember how he was when they first came here.”

That he'd noticed, and cared enough to let this happen today, made her throat a little tight. "And he was already markedly better than he'd been back in L.A."

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“That I can believe,” Logan said dryly.

She smiled wryly, unable to argue that point because she felt the same way. “It was hard for my brother to walk away, but...”

“Jackson will be there for anything that boy genuinely wants.”

“Yes,” she said, somehow not surprised that he knew that about her brother. “He’ll never forget what it was like when Jeremy wasn’t...here. When he was so lost.”

He studied her for a moment. “Nor will you, I suspect.”

She didn’t try to deny it. “No. I love that child, and it was hell to see him like that.”

“And made you relive a little of your own hell?”

The question—asked in a softer, gentler tone—startled her. Enough that she answered honestly, instead of brushing it off. “Yes.”

“Sometimes the only thing that gets you through that is knowing that someone else really knows how you feel. And Jeremy knows you know, so you’re helping him.”

She liked the way he’d put that. Then another thought struck her as she remembered just who he was. What she’d seen him do with one of the particularly nervous horses on Nic’s—well, and Jackson’s now too—ranch.

Making sure there was a smile on her face now she asked, “Is this how you do it? The

horses, I mean? You somehow get through to them that you know how they feel?"

She counted his startled look as a victory, because she doubted this man was taken aback very often. Then, slowly, he smiled back, and it was a lovely one.

"In a way, yes."

"I'd love to see that at work sometime." She went on before he could react. "Anyway, thank you. I know this is probably not how you wanted to spend the next fifteen or sixteen hours."

She was certain she could feel his gaze now. And his voice had changed somehow when he spoke, gotten a little rougher.

"I can think of worse ways."

She had to take in a breath to steady herself. "So can I."

They were at the big oak tree now, and she made the turn back into civilization. The moment she thought it, she wondered at the oddness of the thought. True, his place was a bit out of the way, but it wasn't actually remote. Last Stand was only about five miles away. It was simply that there was nothing else around it that made his home feel so isolated. Even the Baylor ranch had multiple barns and outbuildings in addition to the main house, plus the place that Jackson and Nic had made their own, which made it feel more...populated somehow.

She herself had always needed more quiet and alone time than David ever had. He had been much more gregarious and thrived on large gatherings, while she had looked upon them as something to get through. She could talk to people, and be outgoing and friendly, but afterward she needed time to recharge, while David had always been energized by the same process that drained her. It had taken him some

time to understand this, and it had been one of the roughest spots in their mostly smooth marriage.

She had the feeling Logan Fox already understood. And the fact that she had thought that in conjunction with her memories of her husband rattled her to the core. So much that they made the rest of the drive in silence.

If Jeremy was sleepy, being roused at this early hour, it certainly didn't show. He was so excited he fairly buzzed with it, hurling himself at her for a hug, and then grabbing Logan's hand to lead him over to Jackson's waiting SUV.

"Nic's gonna drive at first, then you when we get there," the boy explained.

"Got it all worked out, huh?" Logan said, making no effort to free himself from the boy's grasp.

"Yep! So Dad and Nic start in front, then you and Aunt Tris." He grinned. "Dad says I'm in charge of the back seat. That means I'm the boss there."

"Yes, sir," Logan said. Her nephew's grin widened, and she could have hugged both of them.

It wasn't until that heartwarming emotion ebbed a little that she wondered why the boy had made the assumption that she and Logan would always be sitting together no matter who was driving.

Chapter Fourteen

It went much more easily than Logan had expected. He found himself unexpectedly cheered by Jeremy's boundless curiosity. In a way the boy reminded him of himself, always wanting to know more about so many of the things they encountered, even on

the drive to Houston. It did surprise him that the boy wanted to sit between them rather than next to a window, although he was grateful for it. Even that buffer was welcome, because he wasn't sure how he would have done sitting directly next to Tris for hours.

He found himself enjoying the way Tris interacted with her nephew, subtly teaching him how to find out the answers to questions none of them could answer. The love between the two was so clear it was practically blinding, and he felt a pang he hadn't had in a very long time for what he'd missed out on as a kid. He switched his gaze to look out the window, realizing he wasn't even aware of where they were, he'd been so fixated on the pair beside him.

When he saw the sign for Bastrop, he realized he'd entirely missed the outskirts of Austin. He grimaced inwardly at himself and this habit he'd developed when Tris was around, to get so focused on something he missed everything else. He stared out at the passing landscape. It was full light now and promised to be a warm spring day. It was early enough in the year that the humidity of Houston might not be too bad, and it would be—

“—ask Logan about that.”

The sound of his name in her voice snapped him out of his effort to focus on anything but her. Realizing he had no idea what they'd been talking about, because he'd been trying so hard to not be glued to her every word, he had to look at Jeremy and say, “Sorry, I was figuring out how far we'd come. Ask me what?”

“How far have we come?” the boy asked, distracted from whatever his original question had been. Having grown up with a brain that frequently lost old questions to the momentum of new ones, he understood.

“I'm guessing about a third of the way,” he answered, “if you count all the way to Galveston.”

At the boy's furrowed brow Tris said, “So if we've done a third, how much of the way is left?”

Logan could almost hear Jeremy's mind working. “A third is when you divide it into three, right? So we have two more of those left?”

“Exactly right,” Tris said, grinning so widely at the child Logan felt that tug inside yet again. “Now, what was your question for Logan?”

The tug became a jab, simply at the sound of his name in her voice.

“Oh!” Jeremy exclaimed, and turned his head to look up at Logan. “Why do horses wear shoes but cows don't?”

The simple question made him smile. “Actually, there are places where cows wear them, too. Oxen, anyway, which are the big ones that pull wagons and plows. But they’re very different, because they have two toes.”

Jeremy blinked. “Cows have toes?”

“That’s what a hoof is, in reality. Cow’s hooves are divided, but horse hooves aren’t.”

The boy looked boggled, then glanced down at his own feet in his now well-broken-in boots. Logan would have been willing to bet his toes were wiggling inside. “I didn’t know they were toes.”

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Tris said. “Horses have one, so they can run faster, cows have two, and so do giraffes and some others. Maverick has four, because dogs used to have five like people, but one has migrated up the leg over time.”

“We have five fingers, too,” Jeremy observed, holding up his hands. “Well, counting your thumb.”

To his own surprise Logan couldn’t stop himself from saying, rather teasingly, “Ah, that wonderful, opposable thumb.”

Jeremy wiggled his thumbs. “That’s what lets us grab stuff and pick it up.”

“Exactly,” Tris said.

“Ever notice,” came Jackson’s voice from the driver’s seat, which he’d volunteered for on this stretch to widen his knowledge of his new home state, “how even a car ride with my sister turns into a learning experience?”

“Never pass up an educational opportunity,” Nic said solemnly from the front

passenger seat.

Logan thought they were teasing her, but he shot a quick glance at her face to be sure. She didn't look upset, in fact was wearing an obviously exaggerated haughty expression as she said, "I seem to remember it getting you through a couple of history finals, brother mine."

Jackson let out an audible sigh. "There is that," he agreed, and they all laughed.

Logan said nothing. He wasn't used to such familial teasing, and he didn't quite know how it worked. Nic wasn't technically part of the Thorpe family—yet—but she'd joined in easily, which told him he was the one out of sync. As usual.

He was glad when they switched off to him driving, pulling off the freeway toward the little town of Hedwig Village, which had caught Jeremy's eyes because of the name shared with a favorite creature from a favorite book. Glad because he then had to concentrate on driving.

"You sure you don't want to meet Houston up close and personal?" he asked Jackson as the other man climbed into the back seat. "No better way than trying to drive through it."

"I'll watch and learn," Jackson said with a grin. "And be thankful," he added with enough emphasis that Logan had to chuckle.

"All righty, then," he said as he slid behind the wheel, trying to ignore the fact that Nic and Tris had indeed also changed places, just as Jeremy had ordained. "If it was just me, I'd be bailing now and picking up the 45 south of the city to head to the Space Center, but in this case you should get the full effect. Welcome to Houston."

"At least it's Saturday," Nic said, rather glumly.

As it turned out, it was a light traffic day and they made it through the city fairly quick, with Nic pointing out things occasionally, and Tris explaining all the roads named after famous Texans. They reached the Space Center southeast of the city shortly after it opened at ten.

Jeremy was wide-eyed and slack-jawed as he looked around, gaping at the space shuttle replica mounted atop the original carrier aircraft.

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“You can go inside both of them,” Nic told the boy. “We’ll come back and do that next time.”

Even Jackson seemed impressed. “I get the feeling it’d take a few trips to see everything here.”

“They have a lot of—” Logan glanced at Tris “—educational stuff, too, for kids and adults.”

Jeremy was so wound up by the time they got on the tram for the tour that would take them to the restored Apollo Mission Control center that Logan thought he might just go airborne himself. But he found he was looking at everything a little differently, just by watching the child take it all in. He might only be seven, but he recognized how old the equipment looked,technologically, and was more than a little awed at the number of people it had taken to do something he’d taken for granted as near-ancient history. They’d watched the movie and a couple of documentaries, but the boy said, “Seeing it for real is...different.”

And that alone, Logan thought, made the trek worth it.

But there was another aspect to this that hadn’t occurred to him. From the moment they’d arrived, he’d noticed people looking at them, but he hadn’t really put it together until he’d heard two women within earshot exclaiming in recognition as they looked at Jackson.

He’d already been recognized. And it struck him what a life it must be, to not be able to even take your son on an adventure like this without having people staring at you

and probably eventually approaching you as if they had the right to some of what should be your child's time. He hadn't really thought much about this aspect of what Jackson's life was like, and he didn't like it.

Jackson was crouched down talking to Jeremy about what had happened here at the mission control room when the two now-giggling women made a beeline toward him. Logan wasn't sure what made him do it, but he stepped into their path. He turned to face them, his arms crossed over his chest, and simply stood there, watching them steadily. They slowed immediately, looking at him warily.

"What are you, his bodyguard?" one of them asked.

"A friend," he said simply.

"A good friend—" Tris's voice came from just behind him "—who just wants to make sure he has time with his little boy." She slipped a hand through his folded arms, but kept her gaze on the women. "After the tour, I'm sure Jackson would be happy to stop and say hello. Can you kindly wait that long?"

He saw the expressions on the women's faces change as Tris spoke, from wary to understanding. "Of course. It was so sad, about his wife, and we just want to say how sorry we are."

"He'll appreciate that," Tris assured them.

A moment later, after they'd walked back to where they'd been, Logan relaxed. "You're good at that," he said, sounding as inept as he felt.

"More practice," she said. "But I couldn't have done it if you hadn't intercepted them first. And don't think Jackson didn't notice, because he did."

He shrugged, not sure what to say to that. But he saw Jackson looking at him and turned his head to meet his gaze. Her brother gave him the briefest nod, but there was a world of thanks in it. She'd been right, he had noticed.

By the time they were back in the car and headed to Galveston, he was having second thoughts. If Jeremy had been so excited about the Space Center, would a classic old sailing ship hold any interest for him at all? But as he drove he could hear the boy from the back seat, now asking if it was like a pirate ship.

"Logan, help?" Jackson asked, laughing. He liked that about the guy—he had no problem admitting he didn't know something.

"It's the same kind of ship," he said, "although the *Elissa* was never a pirate ship. She probably would have been a good one, though, if some pirate had ever taken it in mind to steal her."

Jeremy laughed, and it gave Logan a strange feeling of satisfaction.

Admittedly he was no real judge, but the boy seemed almost as excited at his first sight of the three-masted barque as he had been at the space shuttle.

"She's pretty old, and most of her parts have been replaced or messed with in her life," he said as they walked the fairly recently replaced decks.

Jeremy looked up at him, still smiling. "I thought those computers and stuff were old."

Logan didn't know what the concept of time to a seven-year-old was like, but Jeremy was awfully smart, so he gave it a shot. "Look at her, and think about those computers. Do they seem like different worlds?" The boy nodded. "Then think about this. She was built in 1877. We went from this—" he gestured to the boat "—to those

computers and rockets and men on the moon, in less than a hundred years.”

The boy’s brow furrowed as he thought, but Jackson let out a low whistle. “Never thought about it quite like that. Wow.” Then he turned his head to look at his sister. “I see why you like him so much.”

Tris’s cheeks flushed, and she seemed to suddenly find the rigging of the old three-master fascinating. And he just stood there, words once more vanishing from his mind.

Chapter Fifteen

Tris pulled her worn, leather notebook out of her purse, and freed the pen clipped to the spine. She wanted to make some notes about the day, as she always did after one of her trips. Grimacing inwardly, she decided she would skip her brother’s teasing jab in her recounting.

Logan, behind the wheel as they made their way back toward Houston, glanced over when she moved, and when he saw the notebook lifted a brow at her.

“No electronic device?”

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“I get enough of that at school,” she said with a slight roll of her eyes. “Besides, this is my personal recounting of what we saw today, and I prefer this when it’s personal.”

“Because handwriting is more personal.”

She was a little surprised he got that. “Exactly,” she said. “And quicker.”

“As long as you don’t lose the notebook.”

She looked down at the heavy leather cover, dyed a dark blue. Ran her fingers over it lovingly. “I’ve had this since high school. I’m not about to lose it now.”

They slowed to an easy stop at a red light. “I bet it’s been refilled a time or two.”

“Yes.” She hesitated, then, because he was looking at her now, went ahead. “It was a gift from my father, who feels the same way about handwriting, and to this day loathes electronic devices. He uses a phone and computer, especially to keep in touch since they moved to Florida, but the griping never ends.”

He smiled. It seemed to come more easily, as if he were...trusting her more. And that, for reasons she didn’t care to analyze just now, pleased her.

“I see why your father picked that one. It matches your eyes.”

She felt a tinge of heat rising to her cheeks and her gaze shot back to his face. But he was already looking away, as if he regretted saying the words. And with a little jolt

she realized she didn't like that he regretted it. Then the light changed, and they were rolling again, and his attention was back on the road ahead.

The rest of the ride home was quiet, because Jeremy had fallen asleep as soon as they'd cleared Houston. Logan told Jackson and Nic to stay put, he was fine to drive the distance, so they wouldn't wake him up by changing drivers.

Tris couldn't help wondering if he wanted to drive because he didn't want to get into that back seat with her again, after what Jackson had said. I see why you like him so much... She'd wanted to punch her brother for it, and the only reason she didn't was that it would make it worse.

The problem with the silence, which she ordinarily wouldn't mind at all, was that it gave her imagination too much room to run rampant. The way Logan had looked at her after Jackson's wisecrack had been unsettling. It wasn't that it wasn't true—she did like Logan. She already counted him as a friend, with the potential to be a good one. But Jackson had said it with that tone of implying something more.

Something...romantic.

She couldn't deny that she felt things she hadn't felt in a very long time around the man, but...

No. Not that. No wonder Logan had looked stunned. Because he didn't feel that. Did he?

She found herself thinking of the profound difference between the front and back seats of this car. In the back, with Jeremy sleeping peacefully against his father, whose arm was around Nic, who was in turn snuggled up against his other side, was a family. There was no doubt this was what Jackson and Nic had built. And she was beyond delighted for her brother and her nephew. That Nic was also a friend of hers

only made it all sweeter.

But here, in the front seats, were two lost souls, one who'd had a rough life from the beginning and one who had built a beautiful one but lost it. Not that hers had been perfect—she and David were human, after all, and had had their moments—but still, she'd loved him deeply. And was still very aware of the hole his absence left in her life and heart.

She stole glances at Logan now and then, thinking he had one of the most beautiful profiles she'd ever seen, living or in artwork. That perfect nose, the strong, masculine jaw, the corded neck. Once when she looked it was just as a truck was passing in the other direction, headlights flaring and lighting up the inside of the SUV and confirming her assessment.

His hands—those strong, productive hands—were steady on the wheel, and she realized suddenly how smooth a driver he was. Usually she didn't passenger that well, getting a little queasy at any weaving or chronic braking and speeding up. But she felt nothing of the kind with Logan, because he didn't do any of that. His driving was efficient, consistent, and he obviously anticipated everything in time to make any necessary adjustments smoothly. She could ride with him even through mountain roads or city traffic.

She could ride with him anywhere.

Her breath caught at her own silent words. This was getting out of hand. She didn't know what to do with or about the kind of reaction this man caused in her. It had been too long. So long that she had pretty much written off that she would ever have any kind of response like this to a man again. At first, after finally emerging a bit from the maelstrom of grief David's death had left her in, she had pretty much resigned herself to the role of sister and aunt. Then, just as she'd been thinking she might get through this after all, her beloved sister-in-law had been killed, and she'd

been pushed right back off that cliff again.

She'd never thought of herself as a coward, but for so long the outside world had seemed so hard to bear. She'd been consumed by the fight against her husband's illness, and once it had been lost she hadn't been sure she knew how to deal with anything else anymore. With a world without him in it.

And then had come more death, of a young woman with everything to live for, leaving the two people Tris loved most in that same sinking boat she'd been stuck in.

She'd forced herself to go back to work, mainly because it took most of her energy. And she made sure her list of places she wanted to visit took up the rest. She'd dealt with feeling more than any human being should ever have to, more intensely, and there was absolutely nothing left.

Or so she'd thought. Until Logan Fox had stepped out of the periphery and into the middle of her life.

She stayed silent, and refrained from any more surreptitious peeks at their driver until they pulled in through the gate of the Baylor ranch. Then she was able to distract herself by watching, with a beautiful sense of happiness and rightness, as her brother lifted his sleeping son carefully out of the car.

Jackson had always been the brave one. He'd been the one who'd confronted things, the one who had often stood up for her, despite technically being the "little" brother, by a couple of years. And he was proving it all over again now, risking his heart again after it had been pummeled nearly to death, while after more than three times as long she still felt beaten.

She smothered her tangled feelings as she watched her brother so gently cradle Jeremy in his arms. She saw that Nic was doing the same, and the love that fairly

glowed from her friend's face made her tear up.

She was still blinking a bit rapidly after they'd said good night and she and Logan headed to her car.

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“You all right?” he asked, a little gruffly, when they were seated again.

“Fine,” she said. “Better than fine. I’m so happy for them.” She nodded toward the house her family had gone into. Odd, she hadn’t quite realized that except for the surrounding trees it resembled Logan’s place, on a rise with what was probably an expansive view out over the Hill Country. She hadn’t been there long enough to look, nor had she been invited to do so, something she’d best remember.

“They’re a good fit,” he said.

“Yes.” She started the engine and backed up until she could make the turn onto the drive to the gate. A much, much shorter drive than the so-called driveway to Logan’s isolated place. “Tell me if I make a wrong turn or something.”

He made an odd sound, almost as if he’d had to smother a laugh. Maybe he was used to people getting lost trying to find his place. Then again, she had the feeling he didn’t have a lot of visitors out there.

They’d been driving for a few minutes when he said, quietly, “Is it always like that for Jackson? That he gets recognized and then...”

“Pretty much, since Stonewall hit big.”

“That’s the real reason for the one-day trip, isn’t it?”

She glanced at him then. “Probably. If he goes and stays somewhere, it gives time for word to get out and around. If he’d gone back tomorrow like Jeremy wanted, there

could easily have been a crowd.”

She saw him shake his head slowly. “I don’t know how he deals with that.”

“Sometimes,” she said, letting the smile on her face reflect in her voice in the darkness of the car, “he has help. Like you, today.”

“I was afraid I’d make them angry, and it would blow up into some big deal, but...he just wanted to be with Jeremy.”

Tris felt that now familiar tug again, that no matter how tangled her feelings were, this was a good, kind man who would stand up for his friends. And that outweighed any and everything else. So she would simply have to quash those feelings and treat him as she would any friend who had proven himself.

“And you made that possible,” she said.

He met her gaze then. “But you talked them down.”

“I was going to tell them you weren’t a bodyguard but a nanny.”

His eyes widened. She could see it even in the dim, shadowy light. And then he laughed. He laughed, a real, lingering laugh, and it was a wonderful sound that made all seem right with the world. With her world.

The very thought shocked her.

It was nearly full dark when they reached the turnoff, which she only knew because he warned her about a quarter mile ahead. “Coming this way the water warning is the clue.”

She'd of course seen the warning that the dip in the road could flood in heavy rains—they were a familiar sight out here in the Hill Country. And then she saw the even blacker outline of the oak tree, and slowed even more to make the turn.

“How did you find this place?” she asked as they started up the long drive into the hills.

“It belonged to the man who taught me blacksmithing. I lived in the room behind the workshop for a while, then...” He paused, and she saw a flare of pain in his eyes, a pain that was all too familiar to her. So at least there had been someone he'd cared about, cared deeply if she was any judge.

“He died?” she asked softly. It took a moment, but finally he nodded. “I'm sorry. Losing a mentor like that is very hard.” He didn't respond, so she tried to brighten her tone. “So you ended up with your little piece of heaven in Texas.”

He did answer this time, and his voice was fairly steady. “Yes.”

“And you were the perfect fit for it.”

“Or vice versa.”

It was odd, how it felt as if they were leaving the world behind the farther they went. “It must be very peaceful out here.”

“It is.” He sounded back to normal now. “As long as you don't mind the locals.”

She had the feeling he didn't mean people. “Such as?”

“The usual. Coyotes. Bats. White-tailed deer. The occasional armadillo or tarantula.” He caught her reaction and added, “Didn't like that last one, huh?”

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“I admit if I see one, I jump. But I’ve gotten past the run and hide instinct.”

“And the bats?”

“I love the bats,” she declared. “I have ever since I first got here and saw them at the Congress Bridge in Austin.”

“I appreciate the mosquito-free zone they provide,” he said solemnly, and this time she laughed.

She recognized the big turn from this morning, saw the shadow of the darkened house, and slowed to a stop about where she had then. He was out of the car so quickly it almost stung, but on the heels of her reaction she realized he was simply standing there, leaning against the open car door, looking at...something. Curious, she got out, saw that he was looking almost straight up.

She tilted her head back, and gasped aloud. She was looking at the vast, almost smoky-looking spray of stars that was the Milky Way, clearer than she’d ever seen it.

She’d been obviously aware of the night sky as soon as the sun had set, but she’d been distracted, first by him then by driving, and it hadn’t really registered until his actions had called her attention to it now. She didn’t know how long she’d been standing there, motionless, staring upward in awe, when she felt...something. At last she shifted her gaze, to find Logan watching her.

“Another reason I wanted this place,” he said.

“I feel so oblivious,” she said. “I mean, I’ve seen it, but...not like this.”

“Out here we’re away from any lights from Last Stand, and a good fifty-plus miles, as the bat flies, from the lights of Austin. It makes a difference.”

“An amazing difference.”

There was a moment of silence before he went on, and when he did, he sounded as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to. “It’s even better from my back deck. The angle’s better and you can lean back on the lounge and just...look.”

She answered without even thinking about it. “I’d like to see that.”

Another moment of silence before he said, sounding the same way again, “Then come on.”

Chapter Sixteen

He had, Logan was sure, done stupider things in his life, but right now he couldn’t remember any.

What had possessed him to invite, of all people, this woman inside his hideaway? This woman of class, style, used to much better things than she’d find in his home, which was a step or two below humble. He couldn’t even look at her when, after he’d flipped on the lights, she stopped just inside the door and started to look around.

He’d lived here for several years now, and it had everything he needed or wanted. But now he was looking around, trying to see it through her eyes, and he had no doubt she would find it lacking. One large, long room, a basic but fully functional kitchen across one end, and a table on a side wall next to one of the large windows.

Against the opposite wall was the couch where he did a lot of his reading, a small coffee table piled with books, and a couple of chairs. In a few feet of space not occupied by windows and the wood stove hung a flat-screen TV, which didn't get used nearly as much as the reading lamp at the end of the couch. At the far end of the oblong room, opposite the kitchen, was his sleeping area, not even a bedroom, just his king-sized bed tucked into the alcove created by the wall of the bathroom that took up the rest of that space.

It worked for him, alone, but for someone no doubt used to the finer things, to more space and conveniences, it had to look rather Spartan and perhaps even pitiful.

Especially when that someone had been married to an architect, who would no doubt have laughed at the simple, barn-like lines of the place.

"This is wonderful!"

Her exclamation caught him completely off guard. And now he not only looked at her, he stared at her. "What?" he said, blankly.

"The wood on the walls and ceiling, I would have thought it would be too much, but it blends so well with the just slightly different flooring and the cabinets. And the wide-open space...it reminds me of Jackson's place."

He'd only been in the place where Jackson and Jeremy now lived once, back when it had been Clark, the Baylors' foreman's place, but he remembered enough to see her point.

"He's got a better kitchen." Well that sounded lame, Fox.

She turned that way. "You have a fridge, a sink, a stove with an oven, a microwave...and a coffee machine. What else do you need?" She turned back, and

she was smiling at him so genuinely he couldn't doubt she meant what she'd said. "Well," she added, the smile becoming a grin, "assuming you have an indoor bathroom."

It was so obviously teasing he found himself smiling back. "No bathtub, though. Just a shower."

"I imagine there are times you might miss a good long soak, after a long day of wrestling horses and iron."

There were, in fact, days like that. Days when his weary muscles protested after exactly the exertions she'd described. Enough that he'd thought about putting in a hot tub out on the deck, as silly as that seemed for a place that got as hot as Texas did.

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The thought reminded him of the whole point of bringing her in here, and he led the way to the door out onto the deck. He opened it and paused. “Close your eyes for a minute.”

Her brow furrowed at the words, but almost as quickly her expression cleared, as if she’d already figured out why. He wasn’t surprised. He put a hand on her elbow as she took the suggestion and closed her eyes. He guided her out onto the deck, and the moment they were clear of the doorway he reached back and flipped off the interior lights, leaving the deck in darkness.

He gave it a few more seconds, then said only, “Up and just to the right.”

She opened her eyes and looked where he’d told her. And he heard her quick intake of breath, then the small sound of wonder. It was enough of a reaction that he led her to the lounge that was set up at the perfect angle. She didn’t protest—she was still staring upward at the amazing sweep of their galaxy overhead and kept doing so even as she dropped down onto the canvas of the chaise lounge.

He sat in the single chair that was also out on the deck, one each since he was usually the only one who was out here. He watched her watch one of his favorite sights in—or off—the world. It was a long time—a silent stretch he didn’t mind at all, in fact was thankful for—before she spoke.

“How,” she said, not taking her eyes off the array of stars, “do you not spend all night out here?”

“It’s been known to happen,” he admitted. And it was true—sometimes he had drifted

off while lying where she was right now. They were some of the most peaceful nights he could remember.

Of course now, he'd just be remembering her long, slim, shapely body stretched out like this, and probably wouldn't be able to sleep here or anywhere else.

She lapsed back into silence, still looking, clearly savoring. He had no words for how much he appreciated that she seemed to have no problem with the silence, no problem with just...being.

He was so content with the view—and not just of the starry sky—it took him a while to realize what that gnawing feeling was. Actual gnawing of his stomach, from hunger. He belatedly realized that the quick snack they'd grabbed before starting home had long since given its all.

“Are you hungry?” He blurted it out before he thought, since the next obvious question was what to do about it if she was, and he had no idea.

“Starving,” she admitted, but then gestured at the sky. “Although this feeds a lot more than my stomach.”

He lapsed into silence again as she once more put into words what he'd thought and felt many times while out here during this season.

“You know, I can't imagine even Enchanted Rock has a better view than this,” she said, referring to the designated Dark Sky Park near Fredericksburg, dedicated to exactly this activity.

He agreed with her, pleased anew. But then his stomach complained again, and food moved up on the priority list.

“I’m not sure I have anything you’d want,” he said as they at last moved back inside. In more ways than one. He mentally slapped down the errant thought as he closed the door behind them, but when he turned back, she was looking at him in a way that made his gut clench for entirely different reasons.

Now he wished he’d never mentioned food at all.

“We could go get something, but that seems a waste since you’re already home. And I’m guessing delivery this far out is iffy.”

“I’d have to tip as much as the gas would cost to go myself,” he said, his nerves eased by her ordinary tone. Obviously he was the only one who was wound up here.

Of course you are. You think her mind went where yours did?

“A practical man, too,” she said, and he told himself he was imagining an approving tone in her voice. He didn’t know what her financial situation was, but he doubted a man like David Carhart would leave his widow in need.

She was looking around the cabin—that’s what he usually called it, since it didn’t seem big enough to him to be a house—and he couldn’t help wondering what she was thinking of his simple space. True, she’d said she liked the wood, and that it reminded her of her brother’s place, but she could have been just being nice. She would be, kind person that she clearly was.

“I know it’s not much,” he began, but stopped when she shook her head.

“I told you, I think it’s lovely. Only thing I’d miss would be someplace to hide things.” He blinked. She laughed. “I have a tendency to leave things I’m using, or books I’m reading out, until I have to clean up in a hurry. Then I run for the spare bedroom to hide it all if someone’s coming over.”

“And I don’t even have a bedroom.”

She looked toward the end of the room, where his bed—which he’d thankfully made this morning—sat, in full view. “You don’t miss that? Privacy and all?”

His breath jammed up in his throat. “Privacy,” he said, his voice rough as he forced the words out, “hasn’t been an issue since I moved into this place.”

Her gaze went from the bed to his face in a split second. For an instant he thought he saw something there, an answering heat, but he told himself it was wishful thinking. Again. And then she proved it by going on in the most normal of tones.

“I lived in a studio apartment for a while, in college. I missed the privacy of an enclosed bedroom, and it was a small space, but I did it to avoid a roommate, so essentially it was all mine. I thought it was worth the tradeoff.” She gestured around the bigroom. “But this feels huge. And I’ll bet in the daylight when you can look outside, it seems even bigger.”

“It...has a great view,” he admitted. And stopped just short—barely—of saying she should stay and see it in the morning, as the sun rose over the hills with lingering pockets of bluebonnets here and there.

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Get her out of here. Now. Before you do something unforgivably stupid. She's Jackson's sister and a widow who clearly still loves her dead husband. Don't be an ass.

Mental lecture concluded, he spun on his heel and walked over to the fridge, trying to remember what he had. "I really don't have much in the way of food," he admitted when he sensed rather than saw her come up behind him.

"What did you plan on having?"

He shrugged. "Probably scrambled eggs and hash browns."

"I love breakfast for dinner," she said.

And the next thing he knew they were both working at the kitchen counter, him on the eggs and her shredding the two potatoes he had left for the hash browns. He spared a moment to be thankful his kitchen was wide open and not one of those enclosed rooms that would have them bumping into each other all the time.

And as they sat down to eat, he stared more at his plate than anything. Because he didn't dare look at her. It was too much, and he'd say more stupid things, or worse, do something far beyond stupid.

Something she'd said, benignly and unrelated to his thoughts popped into his head, and all he could think was how apt they were.

Tell me if I make a wrong turn...

You did, he thought, his jaw tightening. The moment you turned up my drive.

She didn't seem to know that. But he did. So it was up to him to make sure that turn wasn't something she would regret forever.

Chapter Seventeen

Privacy hasn't been an issue since I moved into this place.

For some reason those words kept circling in her brain as she drove home. Of all the things that had happened today, she picked this to fixate on? All the things they'd seen, the delight on her nephew's face, the growing peace and happiness so obvious in her beloved brother, and yet here she was consumed by those words Logan Fox had said?

Did he mean no one came here? No one spent time in that rustically charming cabin with him? Was he that isolated?

Or did he mean no one had been there who wanted privacy? Now that, she could believe. She could easily picture a female guest being secretly glad the bed was right there in the open, and so close...

She was more than a little stunned at herself. Ever since she'd run into him—literally—in the Baylors' barn, she had started to think about him differently. He was no longer just the man she'd heard about, the expert blacksmith and the more whimsical but undeniable horse whisperer. Now he was also the unexpected history buff who felt the same need she did to see and experience the places where that history had happened, and a voracious reader who bought or checked out books by the stack, again just as she did.

She also found his reticence rather charming, and his quiet contemplations intriguing.

And now she knew he was instinctively protective of Jeremy, and even Jackson, which warmed her to her soul.

She busied herself with her nighttime routine, focusing on it more intently than usual to try and keep herself from focusing on the other now undeniable facts about the man she'd—again—spent the day with.

That he was a tall, strong, beautiful man with the most amazing green eyes she'd ever seen.

She sat on the edge of the bed, putting her phone on the nightstand. Her gaze, as always, went to the framed photograph that sat there beneath the lamp. Her and David, laughing and delighted at the unveiling at the high school. Less than a year later, they would be in the fight of their lives, and a year after that they would lose that final battle.

She grimaced slightly at the dichotomy of what she'd done. She'd moved out of and sold the house they'd lived in because she couldn't bear to be inside those familiar walls without the man who had always been there. Yet she brought with her the picture that had been in the same spot all that time because she couldn't bear not to.

It was a different nightstand, yes, and definitely a different bed—there was no way she could continue to sleep alone in the bed they'd shared—but the photo was still there, within reach, one of the first things she saw every morning and one of the last things every night.

“I don't know what to do,” she whispered to the image.

Yes you do.

As clearly as if he'd been there and spoken she heard David's voice. And thought

about the letter that lay locked away in the top drawer of her desk. The letter she'd read once and never again. The letter she'd thought about tossing in the fireplace of their old home, sending it up in a spiral of smoke just as her life had been.

Seven years.

When she'd stood at his funeral, she'd known she would love him forever. Seven years later she knew it was still true, but the kind of love had changed. She had changed. She'd made progress.

Hadn't she?

Or was she the same, mired-in-grief woman she'd been that day in the cemetery, standing by his newly dug grave? Had she truly not made any progress at all?

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She stood up, picked up that framed photo, and slid it into the drawer.

An image flashed into her mind, last Sunday at the cemetery, when she'd looked up to see Logan standing there. If she was still the same woman she'd been at that funeral, she would have merely nodded and walked away, back to her car to leave. She was sure she would have.

But she hadn't.

And here she was now, having spent her excursion days in his company four times now, albeit twice it was unintentional, just a couple of mad coincidences. That was more time than she'd spent with any one man except her brother since David had died.

And she liked it. All of it. That wasn't supposed to happen.

But Jackson had felt the same way. He'd thought that part of his life was over, after Leah's death. And now...well, he was proving again he was the brave one.

So learn by his example.

The thought startled her. What didn't surprise her was that the first person she thought of was Logan. He seemed to be taking up a lot of brain cells lately.

It was probably a good thing she had lots of work to distract her. They were bearing down fast on the last week of the school year, and starting next week she would have plenty of extra work for distraction as everything wound up in preparation for the

summer break.

She was always focused on work at school, giving her best to the children she taught. Parents had chosen this small school and paid for it privately, and with the small classes she was able to search out each child's skills and talents and nurture them. It was what she loved most about her work, that chance to truly focus and bring out the best in her kids, especially those who were surprised to learn that odd thing they could do, or that different way of looking at things could be valued and useful.

But this time of year, she spent many of her own hours outside of classroom time on working up her own tests to supplement the state-mandated ones to gauge her students' progress. And she was actually thankful for that now, as it kept her mind occupied, and away from thinking about other things.

At least, consciously. She realized it must have been in the back of her mind all week anyway as, when she reached Friday night, it suddenly struck her she'd made no plans for tomorrow. No Saturday excursion to some interesting spot, no visit to a place of history to try and imagine herself in that time, and how she would react to the event commemorated in that place.

No chance at all of running into Logan Fox.

It made her wish she'd saved some of that work to do at home tomorrow. But although she tried when morning came, she was out of even little things to do by noon. She switched to house cleaning then, but all she could think of was that Logan's place had a certain advantage there, in that there was nowhere to hide stuff, as her students called it, so you had to keep things tidy all along.

She spent her Saturday night watching a movie her kids had been talking about a lot. She tried to keep up on things like that, although with this one it was difficult because the attitude of the main character had her grimacing more than once. And when she

went to bed that night, she had a crazy dream about that main character...with Logan stepping in to redirect him, ashe had those women last week in Houston, for Jackson's and Jeremy's sake.

Yes, the man was taking up entirely too much brain space.

By Sunday morning she knew she couldn't just stay here staring at the walls any longer. With the fragments of that silly dream in mind, she decided to go see how her brother was doing, and perhaps spirit Jeremy off someplace fun, if for no other reason than to give Jackson and Nic some alone time.

When she got to the ranch, she encountered Nic's mom first, and so stopped at the main house. The woman immediately invited her inside to show her a new software program she'd found, designed for helping students about the same age they both dealt with find which of several ways to approach studying worked best for them. It was intriguing, and before she realized it, they'd gone through an hour and two cups of coffee.

She wasn't sure what triggered the memory of Nic telling her Logan had helped design and build this desk for Mrs. Baylor. But looking at it now, seeing how perfectly it fit the space, accommodated her wheelchair, those lovely drawer pulls, how perfectly sized the shelves that housed her up-to-the-minute computer gear were, how even the hinges on the cupboard doors looked intricately handmade, she wasn't in the least surprised.

When she stepped outside to head up the hill to Jackson's place, as if her thought had somehow conjured him up, she saw Logan's truck parked by the barn.

"Oh, good," Mrs. Baylor said. "Logan made it out. Sweet of him—Richard just called him this morning."

“Somebody lose a shoe?” She was proud of how even her voice was.

“No, it’s the whisperer we needed. A new colt Richard has been trying to halter-break, and he was having none of it.” The woman flashed a bright smile at her. “This should be good. Let’s go watch. I never get tired of watching what Logan can do with a horse, even a stubborn young one.”

And I never seem to get tired of simply watching Logan.

As they headed toward the barn, Mrs. Baylor using the ramp Logan had also helped build, the only thing Tris could think of was that at least this wasn’t some crazy coincidence, them both ending up in the same place at the same time, like it had been in Fredericksburg, or Fort Sam Houston. Or the cemetery.

“Quietly,” Mrs. Baylor whispered as they neared the open barn door. “Don’t want to startle the colt.”

She nodded and made sure to walk the last few steps with care. But when she stopped dead just inside it wasn’t for the sake of silence, it was because she was staring at the sight before her. The colt, a long-legged, black and white pinto that reminded her of Jeremy’s beloved Pie, indeed had a halter on, but clearly was not happy about it, his feet in constant motion.

“Jackson bought him,” Mrs. Baylor said. “I think he has in mind he’ll be for Jeremy, when he outgrows the pony. He should have been halter-broke by now, we start them within a month, but apparently this one wasn’t.”

She only nodded. That was about all she could manage. Because standing at the colt’s head was Logan, dressed in a perfectly fitting pair of jeans—or maybe they were just ordinary jeans on a perfect male body—and a simple chambray shirt. It wasn’t an outfit that should have taken her breath away, but it did. Something about the sleeves

rolled up halfway to his elbows, coupled with a glimpse of his powerful chest because of the top two buttons left undone, no doubt in his hurry to answer Mr. Baylor's call for help. Top it off with a smoky-gray cowboy hat, and it was beyond eye-catching. To her, anyway.

Be honest. It's not the outfit, it's the man wearing it.

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The colt continued to shift his hooves restlessly and gave a little snort, tossing his head as if in rebellion against the strangenew device on his head. Logan leaned in, and although she could see he was talking, and the colt's ears were trained on him, he was indeed whispering, and she couldn't hear him.

She spotted Mr. Baylor standing in a stall she guessed must be the colt's, behind the half-door, watching. Wondered if that was to make the colt feel safer, or simply to make sure the animal was focused on Logan. She managed to avoid veering off into making that a personal observation. Barely.

"Most foals are generally very curious," Mrs. Baylor said, very quietly. "Like puppies. But most tend to be warier, too. Or less trusting."

That made sense to her. "I suppose it's part of the difference between being predator and prey."

"Exactly," Mrs. Baylor said, given Tris what appeared to be an approving nod. "Dogs have been domesticated for so long that a lot of people forget that part, that their ancestors would have hunted horses."

"Does the new colt get along with Maverick?" she asked, glad to keep the conversation centered on the animals.

"He does, actually. That dog is very clever and welcomed him with half a carrot."

Tris laughed, albeit quietly. "Having eaten the other half himself?" she guessed. Jackson had told her how the dog's affinity for them had helped overcome Jeremy's

wariness about the vegetable.

“That’s what Jeremy said.” Mrs. Baylor nodded toward the pair standing in the aisle of the barn. “And I see our horse whisperer has done it again.”

Tris looked up just in time to see the young, black and white horse walking alongside Logan toward the far end of the barn with every evidence of calm. She shook her head slowly in wonder.

“That,” Mrs. Baylor said with emphasis, “is an amazing man. To come up the way he did, yet still have that kind of empathy to give.”

That caught Tris’s attention. She remembered what Nic had said about him having a rough start in life, that comment they’d never gotten back to. But now it seemed too important to let pass. “The way he did?”

“He’s never told you he grew up in the foster system?” Mrs. Baylor sighed.

“No, he never did.” But it explained so much. His wariness, his quietness, that air he had of watching everything all around him. That need for the isolation his home gave him. He’d probably never had much privacy at all, growing up. It made sense, now.

Mrs. Baylor went on, looking at Tris rather than watching Logan work. “I don’t know the details. I’m surprised you haven’t gotten the whole story, since he so obviously likes you. But I guess he doesn’t really talk about it at all. I only know what little I do because one of my former colleagues was a teacher of his and she had the records.”

...he so obviously likes you.

She had to give herself a mental shake to keep from zeroing in on that phrase to the exclusion of all else. And from appearing too rapt at the way he moved, and how it

was emphasized in those jeans.

They stopped near the far doors, man and horse. With a tug she could barely see from here, and a slight nudge of his hip against the colt's side, he managed to get the animal who had been totally uncooperative just minutes ago to make a one-hundred-eighty degree turn with him. They stood quietly for a moment, Logan leaning over slightly as he whispered...whatever it was he whispered to work his magic.

The colt tilted his head back slightly, as if to better listen. But then his true motive became clear as he unexpectedly grabbed the brim of Logan's hat between his teeth and yanked it off his head.

Tris couldn't help it, she laughed. So did Mrs. Baylor, and Mr. Baylor as well, from his spot in the colt's stall. Even Logan was grinning—taking her breath away all over again—as he looked at the young creature who was standing there as if a little uncertain what to do with his prize now that he had it.

“All you had to do was ask, y’know,” Logan drawled to the youngster, not whispering now.

She laughed again, especially when he reached up with one hand, fingers curled, and rubbed the colt under the jaw. The animal reacted the way Maverick did when you scratched that spot behind his right ear, blissfully. After a moment Logan freed his hat and had it back on his head.

“I think he looks much handsomer in that cowboy hat than the baseball cap he wears at the forge,” Mrs. Baylor said. “Don’t you?”

Tris didn't trust herself to answer with what she really thought of his looks, hat or no hat, so said instead, “I’m sure he just doesn’t want an errant spark or ember to ruin that one.”

For a long moment Mrs. Baylor didn't speak, long enough that Tris looked down at her. The older woman was smiling, a little bit too knowingly for Tris's comfort.

The man and horse started walking back, and Tris couldn't miss how the young animal followed obediently now, keeping pace with Logan's long stride. They stopped in front of the stall where Mr. Baylor was leaning against the top of the lower door.

"He'll be all right, I think," Logan said. "But he's got a quick brain, and I think he'll always be one you have to keep your eye on."

"The smart ones always are," the rancher said, grinning as he took the lead and guided the colt back into the stall he'd been standing in.

Logan grinned back. "True, that. But keep working with him. Pull more down than forward, and stand close. And I'd say he's reward-motivated, so a treat is good when he does it right."

"Like letting him have at my hat?" Mr. Baylor suggested.

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“I’d watch it if you switch to straw this summer—he’s liable to eat it,” Logan said with another laugh. Another delightful laugh she thought she would never tire of hearing. Perhaps because it was rather rare.

Or, she corrected, it was rare around her. Her he usually looked at warily, except when they got past whatever it was that put him so on edge and simply talked.

All that thought did was remind her how often she had thought about that—and him—in this week that had seemed so long and silent in her quiet life, the life she preferred, the life he’d disrupted without even trying, just by appearing in it a few times.

Times that had her thinking and feeling things she hadn’t thought or felt in years.

“Nicely done!” Mrs. Baylor called out with a smile, but not, Tris noticed, until after the colt was secured.

And that was the last thing she noticed, because in response a smiling Logan looked their way. And his smile froze when he spotted her beside Mrs. Baylor. Their gazes locked, and Tris suddenly found it hard to breathe.

And no amount of telling herself she’d imagined that flash of heat she thought she’d seen in those green, green eyes seemed to help.

Chapter Eighteen

It had occurred to him that he might run into her here. He knew from Jeremy that she

often visited them on Sundays, or vice versa. So he'd known, and mentally prepared himself. He told himself if he had to speak to her, he could always ask where her Saturday expedition had taken her, and that should get him past the rough spot.

But somehow, even with that, he hadn't been prepared to look up and see her standing there, looking straight at him.

He was sure he'd probably stood there gaping like a fool for far too long before he pulled himself together enough to realize he'd not answered Mrs. Baylor.

"Thanks," he said a little awkwardly. Then, because it was Mrs. Baylor he managed to go on. "I think he'll be a good horse, maybe even a great one, but he'll keep you on your toes. And he'll teach Jeremy a lot about horses, when the time comes."

"And Jeremy will love every minute of it," Tris predicted as she walked into the barn, with that smile that spoke volumes about her love for her brother's little boy.

He'd never known a connection like that. Like the one she had with her brother, either. He looked away, knowing he could never explain to her why that jabbed at him, not without sounding like some kind of jealous idiot.

Fortunately that brother rescued him by showing up with Jeremy in tow, who had the golden retriever at his heels. And the boy's excitement over the new arrival quashed every other emotion in the barn, from human to canine to equine. It would take a true emotional dud not to smile at his enthusiasm, and he wasn't quite that far gone.

"I still love Pie," Jeremy stated unequivocally.

"Of course you do," Tris said. "But that doesn't mean you can't love this one, too."

"And you're going to be too big to ride Pie one day," Jackson said. He reached out

and tousled the boy's hair. "Maybe sooner than you think."

Jeremy's smile widened. And suddenly Logan had to turn away. This kind of casual, loving, familial affection was something he'd never known, and he didn't know quite how to react. But then, no one here needed or wanted his reaction, so it didn't matter, but still, the ache it raised in him put him on edge. Enough so that he muttered to Mr. Baylor that he had to get going and started to walk toward his truck before the man even answered.

But he hadn't counted on Mrs. Baylor, who stopped him at the barn door.

"You must stay for lunch, Logan. We're having barbecue beef sandwiches, with some of Richard's famous sauce."

He started to shake his head, but Jeremy piped up, "You ever had it, Mr. Logan? It's really good."

He could hardly be rude to the boy. "I haven't. But I've heard about it."

"That's settled then," Mrs. Baylor said, and spun her chair around.

He stood there for a long, silent moment, picturing himself running after her and saying no, he couldn't stay. He couldn't make it work, not with this woman he admired so much for her tenacity and determination.

And so he ended up seated at the big Baylor picnic table amid a crowd. Well, a crowd to him. Mr. and Mrs. Baylor, Jackson, Jeremy and Nic, who had arrived just as they were leaving the barn.

And Tris.

He'd figured he'd be safe enough, with seven of them at a table that seated eight, he'd be the odd one out at one end. He wouldn't be hemmed in and could maybe even make an early escape.

But it didn't quite work out that way, because Mr. Baylor wheeled out a cart with various necessities, including the big pile of napkins needed for handling those huge and delicious beef sandwiches. And he placed it at the end of the table he'd staked out in his mind as a safe place to sit. So somehow Logan ended up sitting in the middle on one side, with Jeremy on his left, across from his father, and...Tris on his right, between him and Mrs. Baylor at the other end.

He was almost relieved when Jeremy started chattering at him, talking about Pie, and the new colt, and how long it would be before he would be old enough to ride, and "How did you do that whispering thing with him?"

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This he could handle, he thought. Tris was talking quietly with Mrs. Baylor, which meant she was turned partly away from him. He could deal with this.

Nic came out of the house with a tray of what looked to him like sandwiches big enough to feed twice this number. He could already smell the tang of the barbecue sauce that he'd heard so much about.

"We keep trying to get Dad to bottle this stuff and sell it," she said as she set the tray down in the center of the table.

Mr. Baylor snorted. "No thanks. Some things shouldn't go beyond family."

Then why am I here?

He groaned inwardly at his own thought. Sometimes his gut reactions annoyed even him. They'd invited him, in fact insisted he stay, so clearly they didn't mind sharing the secret sauce, as it were. He just wouldn't get the recipe if he asked. Which he wouldn't.

He reached out for a slightly smaller sandwich he guessed was for Jeremy, and handed the plate to the boy. Tris had taken her own, so he took the one that was left on that side. Everybody else was already digging in, so he took his first bite. Chewed. Slowly, his eyes widening.

Then he swallowed, looked down at the sandwich in his hand, then across the table at Mr. Baylor. "Wow," he said.

The other man grinned at him. "That'll do."

He couldn't even begin to isolate the number of flavors he could taste. The natural taste of tomato, the perfect touch of spice, some honey sweetness, and a dash of something deep and smoky. It made already delicious beef impossibly luscious, which was not a word he used often.

"Told ya it was good," Jeremy said, oblivious of the trickle of sauce down his chin.

"And you were right," Logan told the boy, liking the way Jeremy smiled at him even while chewing. He focused on his own chewing until, with a speed that surprised him, he was wiping his fingers on one of the pile of napkins.

"Hand me one of those, would you?"

Tris's smile as she asked him made him feel entirely different. He reached out and grabbed the top napkin, realizing she'd have had to lean across him to get one herself. And realizing, he wasn't sure he'd have minded. He handed it to her, and her fingers brushed his as she took it, thanking him more warmly than he thought the simple act deserved. It was all he could do not to jerk back and away at the contact. It wasn't that he didn't like it. It was that he liked it too much.

He shifted his gaze to the man across the table, sitting next to Nic. Tris's brother. The famous, fawned over and gossiped about Jackson Thorpe. Even after he'd walked away from a career most actors would kill for, he was still headline news, for Thorpe's Therapy Horses if nothing else.

As if he'd felt Logan looking at him, Jackson tore his gaze away from the woman beside him. "Been meaning to thank you," he said. "Sorry is doing great with the kids."

Logan smiled at that. The sorrel horse that hadn't been cut out for Hollywood work, with a little coaxing and explanation, had turned out to be the perfect horse for the therapy project. And that Jackson had rescued the horse when he'd been dumped after the powers that be on the show, Stonewall, decided he wasn't worth saving, told him all he really needed to know about the man.

But never in a million years would he ever have expected to be sitting down having lunch with the megastar, let alone talking with him so...easily. It was unsettling.

Almost as unsettling was the unmistakable sense of love that fairly radiated between all of these people. Nic, her parents, and now Jackson, Jeremy and Tris. They were so clearly, so obviously already a family, and the wedding he had no doubt would be forthcoming soon would only put the official seal on it.

Odd, he supposed, that he who had never really had a family, could recognize one so easily. Odder still that he could still feel the faint echo of that long-ago ache, the ache he'd felt as a child even younger than Jeremy, for what he was missing.

For what he would never have.

Chapter Nineteen

She'd needed this. This end of the school year—which came a couple of days later at her school than at the public school district—had been chaotic, as usual. She'd been working many extra hours to make sure everything was done, and done correctly, paperwork filed, grades turned in, and she was, as usual, a bit burnt out. And so on this quiet Sunday morning she'd headed into town, to walk up and down Main Street, looking at the familiar sites and clearing her mind.

When she saw Lark Leclair, soon to be Lark Highwater, coming out of the bank, she almost heard the zing of realization. Of course. Here she was spending far too much

of her time thinking about and trying to figure out Logan Fox, when someone who could have all the answers was right here in Last Stand. Someone she'd actually consulted once before, over a girl in one of her classes who had had issues that were right in Lark's wheelhouse.

Lark, who worked for a local private adoption group, had cut her teeth in Child Protective Services, but had left the government agency some time ago, for a variety of reasons, many of which Tris knew and agreed with. But Lark was far too smart to have discarded what that painful time had taught her. She would have answers.

And thankfully, she was kind enough to say yes when Tris asked her if, for the price of a Java Time latte, she could pick her brain.

"I'm trying to figure someone out," she said.

"Aren't we all?" Lark said with a smile and a laugh.

"Probably," Tris agreed. "This is someone who grew up in the system and is now a...loner. I get the feeling—and it's only that, I have to say—that he's uncomfortable even among friends. Or doesn't like it when there's more than one or two he knows well."

"Sounds like a classic introvert," Lark said.

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“Yes, it does. And there’s a lot of that there, but this seems...more. Like he assumes he’s not wanted or welcome. Or rather, is surprised when he is. Maybe that’s closer.”

“Is this one of your students?”

Tris grimaced. “I wish, because then I would have access to his history, and maybe that would help.”

Lark looked at her consideringly, and after a moment asked, “Is this somebody from Last Stand?”

That made her smile. “Yes. And if you ask me, an important part of Last Stand.”

The other woman smiled back. “I believe you. You were, after all, married to an important part of Last Stand.”

Comments like that always gave her a sort of double-sided snap, pleasure that people remembered and honored David, underlain with the sharp sting of pain that he was gone. Except...this time, the sting wasn’t quite so sharp. Because she was distracted, and wanted to know anything Lark could tell her.

“So, do you want to tell me who it is on the off chance I may know some specifics that I can share—understanding that there’s much I couldn’t, if it was from my prior work—or do you want to keep it vague and general?”

Tris hadn’t expected her to be quite so direct. “You’re going to fit right in with the Highwaters,” she said, not keeping her admiration for one of Last Stand’s first

families out of her voice. “They don’t beat around the bush either.”

“Kane did,” she said simply. “It took a long time for him to trust. Sometimes he still catches himself slipping into his old way of thinking.”

The open, honest admission blew up the walls Tris had thought she needed. If, after what he’d been through, Kane Highwater had been able to trust this woman, then she had to be worthy of it.

“Logan Fox,” she said abruptly.

“Ah.” Lark said it as if she’d had a suspicion confirmed. At Tris’s look, she smiled. “I’d heard you two share a love of history and visiting historical sites. And that he went with all of you Thorpes and the soon-to-be Thorpe to the Space Center.”

“Oh.” Silly as it was, she sometimes forgot just how her brother could make any grapevine hum. “Yes. He did.” She threw away the last of her reservations. “I’m trying to understand, but he goes from open and interested in things to withdrawn and distant so quickly sometimes...”

She didn’t mention that one of those things was her. She was still wrestling with the very thought of being so...fascinated by a man. She’d thought that part of her life over. But she couldn’t deny he intrigued her, and in more ways than one. She wasn’t sure what to call it, not yet, but at the very least she wanted to be his friend. And not just because it seemed like he needed one.

But she sensed this was a man you’d have to tread carefully with, and to her own shock, she didn’t want to put a foot wrong with him. He mattered to her. Whether that could become something else, become more...well, she didn’t know that. Yet.

“If you’ve gotten open and interested out of him, you’re ahead of most of us,” Lark

said with a smile. Then, seriously, she asked, “So, I’m guessing you want my take on how his time in the system might have affected him, and maybe caused this?”

Tris went with honesty. “I don’t want to ask just anyone, because I know a lot of people in town think he’s...odd. You’re the only one I know of who might be able to tell me, without me stirring up a lot of unwanted dust, or sparking rumors, or anything like that. I don’t want to pry into things that aren’t my business, but I don’t want to hurt him inadvertently.”

Lark considered this for a moment, then nodded. “I don’t work at CPS anymore, but I still feel bound by their rules. So I can only give you my speculation on how it might affect someone, based on my experience.”

“Exactly what I want.”

“And,” Lark added, “in any case, I would never want to betray Logan. It’s his story to tell, not mine.”

Tris appreciated that, and liked that Lark had said it, and meant it. “I understand. I just wanted to know...if there was a way I could help, or at the least, not hurt.”

Lark studied her for a moment, then nodded. Tris felt as if she’d passed some kind of test. Lark took a sip of her latte, as if she needed to brace herself. And Tris had the thought that if this was how she felt about a case that occurred long before she’d started working for the agency, it was no wonder she’d left. And if she could feel that way about a case she’d had nothing to do with, it was no wonder she was so good at what she did now.

“All right. A child who went through what he did will obviously have trust issues.”

“I would think so,” Tris said. “The very people he should be able to trust most to take

care of him, he couldn't."

Lark nodded. "And..." She hesitated, then went on. "This was in the news early on—it was a huge local story back then—so I'm not betraying anything that's not general knowledge. He was very young, and there was physical abuse involved."

Tris's breath jammed up in her throat. When she could speak, she said in no small amount of wonder, "So a child who was abused and abandoned so young grew up to be a man who could calm frightened or nervous horses. In a way, that makes perfect sense."

"Yes, I suppose it does," Lark agreed. "But regarding your question, every child is different. Some adapt very quickly, some take longer, and some never adapt at all. A lot depends on their age when they came into the system. Babies tend to do better, and get adopted more readily, because there's less...debris to deal with. The rest run the gamut from adjusting well to shutting down completely. Many will have trust issues ranging from low level to chronic and serious."

Trust issues. The words rang in her head, explaining so much. "Even with people they—" she'd almost said "he," but didn't want to put Lark in an awkward position "—know, and have no real reason to distrust?"

Lark gave her a sad smile. "In many instances, it becomes a case of 'not to be trusted' until proven otherwise."

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Tris had had her share of heartache in her life, but she couldn't begin to imagine what it must feel like to know not even your own parents, neither of them, wanted you.

"And in most cases," Lark added kindly, gently, "depending on age and situation, what happened will be part of them for the rest of their lives." Was that a warning? Tris wasn't sure, and before she could decide Lark went on. "And now I have a question for you. Why does this matter to you enough to ask me?"

"I..." Tris's voice trailed away. But something about this woman, about the way she was looking at her, made Tris say the words she'd never admitted even to herself. "I like him. A lot."

There, she'd said it. Out loud.

"Now that," Lark said, sounding oddly satisfied, "I understand."

Tris let out a long breath, feeling oddly lighter. As if what she'd said had somehow eased some tension inside her she hadn't even really been aware of. Or at least hadn't recognized, because she had never expected to feel it.

She liked—really liked—Logan. And now that she'd put it into words, and spoken them, it felt so...right.

She smiled at Lark. The woman had clearly learned about more than just children in her career. "I don't know how you did that work as long as you did."

"It was worth it, when things went well, and I got the right child into the right

situation. I only left when outside things began to seriously get in the way of that. And now,” she said with a smile so happy and warm it lightened Tris’s mood, “there’s nothing in the way and almost all my endings are happy.”

“I’m so glad,” Tris said, meaning it.

They were walking out of Java Time when Lark paused and turned to face her. When Tris looked at her, she said, “If you can get him to tell you that story, to let it out, that alone might work wonders for him. As alone as he’s been, he’s probably never had the chance.”

Tris thought about everything Lark had said all the way home. And kept thinking about it after she was there, bits of the conversation flowing through her mind as she went rather mechanically about the bit of housekeeping she’d been putting off.

...what happened will be part of them for the rest of their lives.

She wondered just how much of Logan’s reticence and isolation stemmed from that sad childhood history. She guessed a lot. He wasn’t used to being welcomed. He wasn’t used to being valued, not just for what he could do, but for who he was as a man. As a person whose company people would enjoy.

If he could ever break loose and let them see the person beneath the withdrawn exterior.

If.

She realized, now that she thought about that very kind and gentle tone Lark had used, that she had been warning her. Warning her any effort she made might be useless. And that, Tris guessed, was the voice of experience talking. How many had she been unable to reach in that time with CPS? How many times had she run into a

wall as strong and impenetrable as Logan's?

It's his story to tell, not mine.

Yes, Lark was a good person, the very best kind to be doing what she did. The kind you could trust, even if you were a terrified, abused kid.

If you can get him to tell you that story, to let it out, that alone might work wonders for him.

And she wanted that for him. Wanted him to be free of what was holding him back.

And you? Do you want to be free of what's holding you back, too?

"One step at a time," she murmured to herself.

Of course, she couldn't get him to do anything if she never saw him. It had been a week since that lovely day at the Baylor ranch, but it felt like an eternity. She told herself it was because of all the extra work she'd had to do to wind up the year, but somewhere deep down that little voice she often had to quiet was telling her it was more than that.

And now she was, except for some meetings and a couple of extra tutoring sessions she'd be doing through the summer, free.

Free...to do what? Chase down Logan Fox and force him to talk to her? She recoiled at the thought. This did not seem like something that should be forced. But she wasn't sure what else to do.

And late that night, as she lay in the dark unable to sleep, she pondered the fact that this—and he—had become so important to her. She even wondered, for a moment, if

perhaps seeing her brother's newfound happiness had somehow opened her up to seeking some of her own.

The one thing she was certain of at this point was that when the idea of seeking happiness formed in her mind, the only person she could think of was Logan Fox.

Chapter Twenty

This was the fifth night he'd slept out here on the deck.

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It was the clear skies, Logan told himself as he rubbed at his eyes and sat up. The clear skies and the wonderful view of the stars, of their galaxy sweeping across the sky, looking like a wide brushstroke of stars and space dust.

It had nothing to do with the fact that just two weeks ago she had been lying here, on this very chaise, looking as he was now, at the wide, endless expanse.

And he knew it had reached her in the same way it did him. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. Something about the way she'd been so rapt, or the way the starlight reflected in her eyes—

Okay, now you've slid into idiocy, Fox.

Besides, it wasn't as if he'd planned it. He'd just come out here as he often did, to look, and a few times had dozed off.

And slept better than you have in weeks.

Yeah, there was that.

He shook off the swirling thoughts and got to his feet. He guessed that it was about five-thirty, going by the faint lightening of the sky in the east. He didn't have anything on the schedule until a meeting out at the Rafferty place at ten, but he didn't feel like trying to actually go to bed. He was too awake—and too restless—now.

He went inside, flipped on a light, and looked around the big room that was his home. And remembered Tris's reaction to it, appreciation when he'd expected the opposite.

Privacy hasn't been an issue since I moved into this place.

He nearly groaned aloud at his own ridiculousness, saying that to her. And yet...she hadn't given him the look he'd expected, incredulous, disgusted, or anything like it. No, she'd related to it, about how her own single-room place had been worth the trade-off of not having a roommate.

He was beginning to think he should stop ever expecting the expected with her. Of course, he should probably make sure it was never an issue again, by simply staying away from her.

He'd done a little research, after that night she'd lain there looking at the sky with such obvious joy and awe. He'd already known the basics, and had purposely avoided learning any more. Until he felt he had to.

His computing out here was limited to a tablet and a fairly slow connection, but he'd gotten there. He'd found several articles about the high school remodel and addition, which linked him to articles about the brains behind it, the architect. David Carhart, who'd had not only a bachelor's degree in architecture, but had also gone on for the master's, which apparently totaled about seven years of formal schooling. While his own education had been in how to stay unnoticed and survive until they kicked him out of the system so he was on his own.

Not that he hadn't had schooling, it just wasn't that kind. Hard knocks and all that. Except for Bud Dailey. If the old man hadn't taken him under his wing and taught him everything he knew about forging iron and steel, he didn't know where he would have ended up.

I knew you had something special, that magic with horses, the first time I saw you with ol' Rocky.

Logan smiled at the memory of the downright stubborn chestnut stallion. It had been during the one bright spot among the string of foster homes, on a small ranch outside of Whiskey River, just down the road a few miles from Last Stand. It had been the only place where he'd felt a spark of interest, the only place he'd actually liked living.

He'd been nearing the end of that part of his life, in that system, nearly aged out.

And he was terrified.

He never would have admitted it. If there was anything he'd learned in all that time it was to keep his fears hidden. If that made him appear sullen, or stupid, then that's just the way it was.

And then Bud Dailey had come into his life. The blacksmith who had come to shoe some horses at the ranch and had noticed his interest. He'd begun to teach, and Logan had learned quickly. It all made so much sense to him, and he was fascinated. But it wasn't until Bud had asked him to help with the recalcitrant chestnut that he'd discovered that other talent.

And suddenly he had prospects. Bud had offered him work, and a place to stay in the small room behind his workshop. And Logan had learned. And he'd refined that knowledge in the military, a choice Bud had roundly approved. When he'd gotten out, he'd gone back to work with Bud. They reached the point that when Bud had finally wanted to retire, Logan had been able to step right into the business.

It had changed everything, his entire future. And he'd built a life he'd never expected to have, a life that suited him perfectly.

Or at least it had, until Trista Carhart disrupted everything.

He tried to put that disruption out of his head as he showered, put on clean clothes, then went out to the workshop to find something to do until he had to leave. Anything. When he found himself taking things off shelves and putting them right back where they'd been he gave up and went out to his truck, thinking he'd go into town and get a jolt of espresso or something overladen with caffeine.

He ended up getting to the Rafferty ranch a little early, but Maggie Rafferty, the matriarch of the Rafferty clan and possibly the most respected woman in Last Stand after the indomitable centenarian Minna Herdmann, welcomed him profusely. She walked him over to the smaller of their two barns, where her son, leather artist Rylan Rafferty lived and worked.

“Normally I'd have to call ahead and warn him,” she said with a delighted grin, “but Kaitlyn is out on an assignment this morning so he should be at least dressed.”

He knew Rylan had recently married his brilliant photographer girlfriend, Kaitlyn Miller, and Logan was secretly glad he wouldn't be face-to-face with that kind of joy. It was too...something. Uncomfortable. Unsettling, maybe. And right now he was in no mood. He'd gotten enough of that around Jackson and Nic.

But what Rylan had wanted to see him about startled him out of his melancholy.

“I've always thought a custom belt should have a custom buckle.”

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Rylan Rafferty's leatherwork was famous across Texas, his work owned by a former governor and more than one movie star. And his commissioned works were incredible; Logan had seen a couple of the saddles he'd done, and it was amazing how he combined renderings important to the client with the beauty of the art he created. Lately he'd branched into painting, although he said leather was still his media of choice. He'd started with western-style belts carved with various scenes depicting ranch life, and they were still something he loved doing. Logan's mind tried to wander into wondering if Jackson Thorpe had one, but he yanked it back to the present.

"Makes sense," he said, although he was wondering why the artist was talking to him about it.

"Good," Rylan said. "Because I want you to do them."

Logan blinked. "What?"

"The buckles," Rylan explained patiently. "I want you to do them."

"Whoa. No, man, you need somebody like Gabe Walker, over in Whiskey River." The metal artist was justly famous for his incredible work, and the pairing of the two Texas icons would bring buyers out in droves, he was sure.

"I admire Gabe, and his artwork is fantastic. But I don't want to get into two competing visions, here." He gave Logan a sideways look. "You're not a budding artist, are you?"

A short, sharp laugh burst from him. “Hardly.”

“Good. Because I don’t want something so ornate it distracts from the belt itself, but something better than just a plain, smooth buckle.”

“But I don’t do—”

“Something,” Rylan interrupted him smoothly, “like the drawer pulls you did for Barbara Baylor.”

He blinked. Again. “What?”

“Something smooth enough and easy enough on the fingers to be functional, but with a little flourish like you put on those. Just enough to make it not look like something that came out of a factory without thought. Something that would fit whatever the theme of the belt itself is.”

An image flashed through his mind, of those drawer pulls, and how easy it would be to make the same thing, only in the U-shape of a buckle. Add a crossbar at the base...

It could work.

“I knew you’d see it,” Rylan exclaimed.

“It’d be like...a straight bar shoe, only smaller,” he mused aloud, still seeing the image.

“Exactly. And with a tongue for the belt holes,” Rylan said, clearly enthused. “I’ll get you a simple design sketch for eachone, and you just get close. Or let me know if you think something else would work better.”

Better than what Rylan Rafferty came up with? Not likely. But his mind was revving up over this, over something new and different.

“You up for it?” Rylan asked. “It wouldn’t take a lot of your time, and it would only be on a job-by-job basis, but—”

“I’ll try it,” he said, a little surprised at his own quick decision. Then he looked straight at this man, a son of one of the founding families of this town he loved, who had built a reputation that stretched from here to Hollywood. “I don’t know if I’ll be good enough, but I’ll try.”

“You will be,” Rylan said confidently. “After all, you’ve already pretty much done it—you just need to change the shape a little. I’ll get you the first design I have in mind in the next couple of days.”

Logan was still smiling in amazement as he got back into his truck, Rylan thanking him yet again for agreeing to at least try this.

“No problem,” he said automatically as he started the engine, then added rather wryly, “and no promises.”

Rylan grinned. “I get it. But I think Tris was right—you’re the perfect man for the job.”

Rylan slapped the driver’s door in farewell just as his phone rang. He turned to answer it, walking away as he did so, leaving Logan sitting there gaping.

Tris? Tris told Rylan he was perfect for this? Based on...a set of drawer pulls?

He didn’t know how much time had passed before he pulled out of his mental morass enough to actually move. He headed for the Rafferty gate, trying to process all this.

Especially the fact that the only person he really wanted to tell about this new venture was the very person who had recommended him for it.

The very person he was trying so hard not to think about.

Chapter Twenty-One

“So, can you do it? Sorry to ask, but now I’ve got this deal in Austin, and it was your idea after all.”

Tris sat at her kitchen counter, her coffee and toast forgotten, wishing she hadn’t answered her phone. But she couldn’t imagine anyone in Last Stand ignoring a call from famous artist in residence Rylan Rafferty.

“I...”

“Besides,” Rylan added, “you’re the only one I know who knows where his place actually is and how to get there.”

She shouldn’t have told him that, either.

But she had, which left her in the awkward position of having to say yes to his request or come up with some excuse she knew would sound beyond flimsy. Because it would be.

After the call, and her agreement to come by and pick up the sketch and notes he’d made and would leave with his mother at the main house, she sat silently for a long time. Thinking. As she should have thought when she’d been talking to Rylan that day, when she’d suggested Logan for this new task.

She had never planned on getting so...involved in this when she’d made the suggestion. But when Rylan had mentioned the idea he was wrestling with—of

custom-designed buckles for his famous belts—the image of those drawer pulls had popped into her head and she mentally pictured them tugged into the shape of a buckle.

Well, hadn't she been looking for a reason to talk to Logan again? And what better place than on his own home turf, where he might feel safe enough to talk? He might feel safe enough to tell her that story, as Lark had suggested. Not that he had to tell it to her, specifically. It wasn't like she thought she was someone...special to him, but she had the feeling Lark was right. He needed to tell someone. He'd spent a lot of years with all that old pain bottled up inside, and while he'd obviously built a good, stable life for himself, it could be even better, if he could get rid of that old poison.

At least, she thought so. But what did she know? Who was she to decide that for him? But she hadn't really, it had been Lark who'd suggested it. Lark, who did know. So it wasn't really her, coming up with this idea. It was on the advice of an expert, wasn't it? Maybe she should just—

She cut herself off mid thought, wondering when she'd turned into such an indecisive, hesitant creature. True, this was delicate territory she'd never trod before, but what was the worst that could happen? Logan would get mad and not want anything to do with her? So life would just continue the way it had been before. Six-plus weeks ago.

Only six weeks? She'd known him, at least by name and a casual nod of recognition, much longer than that. You couldn't be in Last Stand long and not know about the horse whisperer. But somehow that day she'd bumped into him in the barn at the Baylor ranch seemed lodged in her mind as the start.

The start of what? You deciding you have to be the one to draw him out? Out of a shell it seemed he'd carefully built for himself? Draw him out when maybe he was better off left alone to live in the way he needed to?

Or the start of realizing maybe you weren't as dead inside as you assumed?

And there it was, in so many words. Logan Fox had awakened her in ways she'd never expected to feel again. As usual, she shied away from the thought, much as one of the skittish horses he dealt with did.

She laughed out loud at herself, short and sharp. Had she really just likened herself to a spooked horse, needing to be calmed by one special human with some kind of mystical power?

Then again, Logan did seem to have a powerful effect on her. It just wasn't calming. No, it was unsettling as hell, and she didn't like the inward churning that went with it.

So maybe she did need to be...what, whispered?

That made her laugh again, and that in turn got her up and moving. But she still found herself thinking, about things she had avoided for a long time. Too long, probably. They'd told her at the time David had died that she, too, would feel as if her life was over. That it was a normal response.

But they'd also said it would pass, eventually. So why did she feel as if it hadn't? Why had her brother managed to get through the same hell, and end up happy again, with Nic, while she seemed stuck in neutral at a never-ending stoplight?

She went and rinsed out her coffee mug, watching the water circle the drain and feeling a bit as if her life was in the same pattern. If Jackson could do it, why couldn't she?

She stared down at the mug. With an effort she reached over and put it in the dishwasher rack. In the moment before releasing it and leaving it there a thought hit her, fast and hard.

Maybe you just haven't let go.

She stared at the mug in the rack, feeling a little stunned. Maybe she hadn't. She'd gone through the motions, taken most of the advice about moving on, but inside, in this hidden part of her brain that had just jabbed her with this thought, maybe she hadn't let go at all. Of any of it. David, Leah...maybe she was still fighting the idea of their deaths.

Or denying it.

She did not like that idea. Did not like thinking she had shut herself, her true self, off that much for that long. And the fact that she disliked it so much told her that she needed to face it. And do something about it.

Feeling as if she'd made some major resolution, she grabbed up her keys from the tray she kept on the counter for the purpose. She paused at the door that led into the garage, looking at the light jacket that hung there, but today seemed to be a portent of what was to come, already being over seventy degrees. Soon they'd be in the eighties pushing to and past ninety almost every day of summer. With luck they wouldn't spend too many days over a hundred this year.

Rylan had already left for Austin when she got to the Rafferty place.

"A meeting with the Arts Commission," Maggie said. "There's a push to make him a Texas state artist."

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“Wow,” Tris said. “That would be something. And more than well deserved!”

Maggie’s expression was beyond proud as she handed her the manila envelope Rylan had dropped off before he and Kaitlyn had headed out.

“I’ll get it to Logan right now,” she promised.

Maggie gave her a wide smile. “Say hello for me. And tell him I know this is going to work out splendidly.”

“I’ll do that.”

As she drove off, she was secretly grateful for the conversation starter delivering that message would be. She hoped.

It wasn’t as far from the Rafferty ranch as it was from the Baylors, so she was nearing the big oak tree after what seemed like only a few minutes. She slowed to make the turn, then slowed even more, telling herself it was because the long driveway—if you could even call it that, since it was more like a street of its own—wasn’t built for paved road speeds. But in truth she knew it was because she was nervous. She didn’t like admitting it, but she was.

When she got to the house, she thought perhaps all her nerves had been grated on for nothing, because he didn’t answer her knock. Or the next one. She pondered leaving the envelope at the door but didn’t like the idea. And his truck, his only vehicle, was over by the workshop, so he had to be here, even if the sliding barn-style door was closed.

She started toward the other building and before she'd taken more than a few steps, she saw that a side door she hadn't noticed before was open. She walked that way. As she got closer she could hear music, and guessed that was why he hadn't heard her pull up. And she smiled when she recognized the song and the voice. Kane Highwater, local legend and rapidly rising national phenom. That Logan was listening to him made her relax for some reason. Well, that, and that it was one of her favorite songs of his, about finding your way back to home and family.

And Kane would know.

But what about someone who never really had a family to get back to? She couldn't begin to imagine. She'd been lucky in that respect. She and Jackson had had good parents, and for the too-short time they'd had them, loving spouses. Logan had had neither.

She sighed inwardly. If the opportunity arose, she'd take it. But if it did not, this time, she wasn't going to push it. She didn't think this was the kind of thing that could or should be forced. Not when she was only now facing the reason why it mattered to her. She cared about him, enough already that it made her ache a little when he pulled back. Which was a shock to her in and of itself. She felt a bit as if she were taking her first steps outside after being locked in a small room somewhere for far too long.

She stopped on the threshold, looking at the interior of his workshop with interest. It was much like a spacious barn, high-roofed—which she guessed was a help in the heat of the summer—with worktables along the wall to her right, the forge, fired up but banked low, against the far wall, and various other tools and equipment tidily arranged along the wall to her left. Pieces of tack and cupboards she guessed must hold materials were on each side of the doorway wall.

And, of course, there was Logan. Leaning over one of the worktables, studying something before him she couldn't see from here. He was wearing a short-sleeved T-

shirt in the warmth of both the day and the forge-heated space, and he'd apparently been at it a while because it clung to him slightly. And yet again her breath caught at the way this man was put together. And the work he did to stay in this kind of shape.

She hadn't moved. She hadn't spoken. Yet suddenly Logan stood up straight. His back was to her, so she could see him reach up to scratch the back of his neck, as if something had suddenly itched. And then, quickly, he turned around. And looked at her as if he'd already known she would be there. As if that itch had somehow been...her.

And he looked almost resigned. She didn't want to delve into what that might mean. She dragged out her best official teacher voice, held up the envelope and said cheerfully, "I'm just here to deliver something for Rylan. He said you'd be expecting it."

She saw his expression change, shifting to understanding. "Oh. Yes. He said he'd have something for me today."

She took that as, if not an invitation, at least not resistance to her entering his workspace. Perhaps in part because she wanted to see it, this place where he spent so much time. So as she walked toward him, she looked around, taking in every detail she could put a name to, and making note of the ones she couldn't so she could ask about them.

He met her halfway, and reached out for the envelope. His fingers brushed hers as he took it. "Sorry," he muttered, pulling his hand back.

"For what?" For the electric shock I get every time we accidentally touch? For the stream of warmth every time you do it on purpose, even if it's only to help me in that gentlemanly way of yours?

“My hands are...beat up. Rough. Too rough.”

He didn't say “for you,” but she heard it as if he had.

“Your hands,” she said evenly, “are working hands. The kind that built this place, this state, this country. The kind we could use more of.”

For a long moment he just looked at her. Then, very quietly, he said, “I'll bet you turn out some amazing kids, Teacher.”

Her cheeks heated. He couldn't have said anything about her work that pleased her more.

Chapter Twenty-Two

If he washonest with himself—and he tried to be—he'd admit he'd nearly panicked when he'd turned around and seen her standing there. He'd been lost in thought about the materials he'd need to do what Rylan wanted done. He hadn't been prepared, as he was when they'd arranged to meet. He hadn't been considering the possibility, as he did every time he went into town where it might be possible to run into her, as he had that day he'd made that comment that had somehow stuck in her mind. He hadn't even been wondering if he might see her, as he did whenever he went to some place that had some historical significance.

No, for the first time in a while she hadn't been in the forefront of his mind, as he focused on the task at hand. And now he was standing here dumbstruck, like some kind of idiot who couldn't put two words together. Which had given her time to start looking around.

Now she was standing by his tool rack, looking at it as intently as if it held something that truly interested her. And as widespread as her interests appeared to be, he

couldn't swear that ordinary display didn't.

She didn't look around when he approached, just pointed to the short-bladed, curved tool that hung beside the hoof nippers. "What's that one for? I recognize the ones you use to clip hooves—nippers, I think?—but not this."

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“Yes on the hoof nippers. The other is just a hoof knife, to trim the frog and sole if necessary.”

Her brow furrowed. “I get that the hoof is like a toenail, no nerves, but isn’t the frog sensitive?”

“Not pain wise, if that’s what you mean.” He could deal with this, questions about his work. He relaxed a little. “But I don’t mess with the frog, or the sole, unless there’s a problem, or a loose flap—they’re shed naturally over time—that could gather bacteria or tear. The horse needs that cushion, for a lot of reasons, including keeping the hooves the best shape.”

She asked more questions, and he could almost see her mentally filing away his answers. She truly did have a curious mind.

And she lulled him with her work-related questions, so much that he didn’t realize how far they’d progressed along the tool rack until she stopped dead, staring at the wall. Or rather, the framed photograph on the wall. One of the very few pictures of him that existed.

Him...and Bud.

Looking at the image of the older man, silver haired and with a neatly trimmed beard to match—he used to tease him that he looked like Santa Claus after he’d been on a diet for a couple of years—made his throat tighten up, as it always did. He had to close his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again Tris’s gaze was on him.

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Bud Dailey.”

“He’s important to you,” she said softly.

He swallowed tightly. “He was. He spent years teaching me everything I know about this work. He was the best man I’ve ever known.”

“He’s gone?”

He nodded. Cleared his throat. “A few years ago.”

“Your friend in the cemetery,” she said, putting the pieces together as she so often seemed to.

He nodded, then hesitated, but something about her and the fact that she knew exactly how he must feel compelled him to go on. “This was his place. When I was still a teenager he let me live in the back room here—” he gestured over his shoulder “—because I didn’t have any place else. I came back when I left the Air Force. And when he died, he didn’t have any family, so he left it to me.”

She gave him a rather odd smile and said, very softly, “Sounds to me like he did have family. It just wasn’t by blood.”

His breath stopped for a moment as he realized the odd tightness in that smile was emotion. “He...used to say things like that. Like your brother says about the family you build yourself. Bud said I was his son by choice, not blood.”

“Then I’m very glad you found each other. Even though it’s so very hard to lose someone you’re so close to.”

Yes, he had been close to Bud, the only adult who had ever shown any genuine feeling for him. He'd cared for the man who had taken him in more than he had for anyone else in his life. It was a kind of love, at least. Probably the only kind he was capable of. Although since he'd gotten to know Tris, he...what? Cared? Yes, he did. He could admit that much. But love, the kind she deserved, was something else again. Something he didn't know much about.

He recognized that other kind of love, the meant-to-be-mates kind, like with Jackson and Nic, but he'd only ever seen it from the outside. And likely only ever would see it that way. A fact he had to work to remember when he was around Tris. Because for the first time since Gretchen he was pondering the risks, and wondering if it was worth it.

"So tell me, do you think it's true, about loving and losing?" she asked.

He stared at her, only able to because she was looking at the photo again. And before he realized what he was doing, he was speaking the famous words. "'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all'? Maybe for Tennyson. Is it for you?"

She met his gaze then, and something in her eyes told him of the depth of that pain of loss. "Now, looking back, I can say yes. But only because the pain has changed."

"Changed?"

"When it hits, it's as deep and sharp and bloody as ever. But it no longer comes as often, or takes up residence for days on end. So I guess the previous line of that poem applies."

He gave her a sideways look. "Quizzing me?"

She smiled. “No. I know you know, because I’ve heard about you and Slater Highwater trading quotes.”

“He did give me a reading list,” he said wryly. The Last Stand Saloon owner was notorious in town for such things, which was what made him the perfect match for Joey the librarian.

““I feel it when I sorrow most,’ then?”

“Yes. Strange, isn’t it, that when we’re in the most pain, we feel it’s better to be in that pain than not?”

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He looked back at the photo on the wall. He'd been nearly twenty when it was taken, two years out of the system, and had been working with Bud and living here for nearly that long. It was just before he'd left for his military service, and he'd been uneasy about leaving. But Bud had assured him he would still have a place here when he came back, and asked a friend to take the photo for both of them.

He wasn't sure he could comprehend the depth of her kind of pain, but the passing of the man smiling at him in that picture had been the worst thing he'd ever felt. But the only way to avoid it would have been not to stay when Bud had offered that back room. And if he'd walked away, he would not have the life he had now. It had all been given to him by this man, who indeed had treated him like no one ever had before. Like he imagined it must feel to have actual family.

"It's worth the price," he murmured, focused on the kind, warm brown eyes of the man who had never lost patience with him, even in his most edgy moments. "I'd probably be dead by now if he hadn't come along."

"Then I'm very, very glad he did."

His gaze shot back to her face. There was no mistaking the sincerity he saw there. She was glad he was alive. He didn't know how to interpret that, but he couldn't deny the truth of it.

"And," she added, in that same undeniably sincere tone, "I'm certain he would be very proud of you today."

"I...I'd like to believe that."

“Believe it,” she said, almost insistently. “You’re an important part of Last Stand, Logan.”

He had a place here, yes. He didn’t think much beyond that, because it was already more than he’d ever expected or hoped for. Tris tilted her head slightly, in that way that he knew meant curiosity. He sensed a question coming. But then, in the instant before it did, she gave a shake of her head and stopped.

“What?” he asked.

“None of my business,” she said.

“Don’t I get to decide that?” He acknowledged a bit of wonder that he was pushing her to ask him a question when he usually dodged such things.

“But the question itself might be...distressing.”

“I think I can deal,” he said dryly. “Snowflakes don’t generally last long in Texas.”

She laughed. Then, still smiling, she went ahead. “I was just wondering about your name. Is it Logan Fox? Mrs. Baylor said you were very young when they...found you.”

He went still. Wondered at the juxtaposition of the question now, when they’d been talking about the only other person he’d ever explained this to. When he didn’t speak, she did.

“Told you it was none of my business.”

She sounded almost sad that she’d asked, and for some reason that made him answer. “I was somewhere between a year and a year and a half old, they told me.” He

grimaced. “If I knew my name, if I even had one, I couldn’t say it. So, I got named by circumstances.”

“Circumstances?”

He braced himself, then went on with what he had no doubt would end her curiosity for good.

“I was found because someone stopped to look at a fox who was digging in a dumpster from a company named Logan Refuse.”

He grimaced again. It still stung, as ridiculous as it was, after all this time. She was staring at him. No doubt trying to think of a way to get away from him now that she knew the truth.

But then she was smiling. And then it was nothing short of a grin. “Someone,” she said, “was both observant and clever.”

He blinked.

“It’s a great name,” she added. “Strong. They must have seen even then what a man you would become. I can’t picture you as anything else.”

“My mother,” he said carefully, “threw me away. Not just because I was a baby she didn’t want, or she would have done it when I was first born. But she kept me for a year and a half, then threw me away. I wasn’t just a baby she didn’t know or want, I was the kid she kept until she realized—”

He cut himself off from finishing with the too painfully familiar “she hated me,” when he realized his volume was growing.

“Until she realized she wasn’t good enough for you?” she suggested. “Now that I can believe. And the loss is definitely hers.”

Logan stared at her, sure he was probably gaping but unable to stop. He’d known it his entire life, that he wasn’t just a baby his mother hadn’t wanted, but that she had kept him long enough to grow to hate him and want to be rid of him enough to throw him in a dumpster on her way out of town. When he was a kid, he used to dream that she hadn’t even stopped the car, but had just rolled down a window and tossed.

Until she realized she wasn’t good enough for you...

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Such an idea had never, ever occurred to him. “I don’t think,” he said, his voice coming out colder than he’d intended, “you throw something away because you’re not good enough.”

She went very still, and her chin came up. Something hot and fierce flashed in those eyes. “And I think spending any time at all thinking about the kind of people who would do what she did, to an amazing human being like you, is an absolute waste. But I’ll leave you to it, if you must.”

And then she was gone, leaving Logan staring after her in more than a little bit of shock. Not at her departure, but at her words....an amazing human being like you.

At her words, and the simple fact that she had so clearly meant them.

*

Tris felt awful by the time she got home. She didn’t know why she’d gone off on him like that. It just hurt so much to see him blame himself, as if a tiny child could be responsible for being abandoned in such a harsh, cruel way. Couldn’t he see that what he’d done, the life he’d built—thank you, Bud Dailey, I wish I could have known you—negated all that? That he had proved his parents—if his father had even known he was a father—so very, very wrong?

She shook her head sharply as she got out of the car and headed inside. Even her thoughts were jumbled, full of starts and stops and side trips. Maybe she needed to sit down and think about herself a little, and why she reacted to him this way. It just hurt to see how hard he was on himself, when he was—she’d been right about this—such

an amazing human being.

Logan Fox.

A wild animal and a dumpster.

How could she possibly know how that history would make her feel, if it was hers? She'd grown up with loving parents, and a protective big brother. She'd found a deep, precious love with David. Logan had had none of that. He'd grown up knowing he'd been tossed away like so much garbage. Grown up in a system that, for all its good intentions, so often failed.

And she realized with a sad, sinking feeling that it wasn't only that he wasn't used to feeling welcomed, as she had thought after talking to Lark, it was that he knew nothing about being loved.

She closed the door from the garage and leaned against it, staring unseeingly at her kitchen, suddenly breathless.

He knew nothing about being loved. She had meant only that familial kind of love she'd been lucky enough to have in her life, but she couldn't stop her mind from jumping to the other kind, that once-in-a-lifetime connection to someone that made you understand all the meanings of the wordmate.

But was it once in a lifetime? She'd always thought so, in that romantic way David had teased her about. She'd always laughed at his teasing, admitting that, for a grounded, practical woman like her the flights of fancy were a bit of an aberration. One time she'd tried to point out to him how much of history, both good and bad, was driven by the kind of love she was talking about. But he had just shaken his head over her fascination with history. Historical buildings, that he could understand, and the history of the people who had built them, but the great love stories of history? Nope,

not interested.

At first, she had felt stung, but then David had added, “Why would I be, when I’m living my own great love story?”

It had been impossible to stay mad at him after that.

But then, she had always found it impossible to stay mad at him. Death, yes, she could stay mad at that, for taking him. But he’d been so sick, so lost, in so much pain, so not David anymore by the end, she couldn’t beg him to keep fighting any longer.

She’d had to let go. She’d had to accept that the huge hole he’d left in her life was permanent. Nothing could ever fill that empty place. No matter what he’d said in that letter.

She hadn’t thought about that, the letter she’d only found after he’d died, in a long time. She’d only read it once anyway—or tried to, through the constant veil of tears—but once had been enough.

She slammed a mental door on the memory, and for good measure locked it. She tried to busy herself, doing housework that didn’t need doing, going over lesson plans for the tutoring sessions coming up that she’d already been over, and over. She grabbed the book she’d been reading, a historical novel that she’d related to since it featured a widow who had had to build her own life alone. But tonight it couldn’t hold her.

It couldn’t hold her because she kept thinking about Logan and his tragic story, as sad as anything she’d ever read. And yet he was who he was, a man with work he loved, a talent rare and special, and the capability to laugh now and then despite the life he’d had. It made her life seem soft and cushy by comparison. And David’s, too. Not that they hadn’t worked hard, they had...but they’d had a strong, sturdy foundation to build on. Logan hadn’t. Until he’d met his mentor, he’d had nothing.

And yet here he was, the man he was, and that did nothing less than amaze her.

She dropped the book on the end table beside her. An image formed in her mind, of the wide-open space of his home, the books piled on the coffee table in front of the couch, remembered when, in passing, he'd rather sheepishly admitted he often fell asleep reading on that couch. She could just picture him, his long, lean form stretched out, probably with his boots kicked off, propped up with the pillows she'd noticed piled at one end next to a serious-looking reading lamp.

The strangest sensation flooded her as she imagined herself sitting there too, reading as he was, in the quiet peace of that remote location, with the sweep of the galaxy over their heads, utterly at peace on this tiny speck in that infinite space.

It took her a moment to realize that the feeling that had overtaken her at that scene in her imagination was also peace, of a kind she hadn't known in years.

And...yearning.

It had been so long she hadn't even recognized the feeling. She'd felt the ache, the restlessness for some time now, but hadn't been able to name it. Until now. Until she finally admitted that she more than liked Logan.

She wanted him.

She wanted that scene in her imagination to end in the only way it could, with them, together, showing those stars above just how carnal two hungry human beings could be.

A ripple of heat went through her, a kind of heat she'd thought long dead and buried. And suddenly peace was the last thing she wanted.

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Especially from Logan.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Logan slammed the truck door shut with far more force than was required. When something metal tumbled in the bed, clanking loudly, he swore under his breath.

His entire morning had gone like this. Hell, it had gone like this since yesterday. Since Tris had turned on her heel and walked out on him.

...an amazing human being like you...

She'd said it with such fierceness there was no doubting she meant it. He'd been called many things in his life. As a kid, a pain in the ass, bastard, pitiful, and countless other slurs. As an adult, at six foot, one ninety and most of that muscle, not many were brazen enough, so if they thought it they didn't say it. And women didn't seem to mind looking, even flirting a little. Which made him more uneasy than he could explain.

But he'd never been complimented with the kind of fervor and honesty and uniqueness that Tris had given him. And more than once, if he was honest about it.

And that, he admitted sourly, was likely why he'd spent every hour since she'd left screwing things up. If it wasn't for the fact that he always got an early start, he'd be late to his first job this morning. And this was a job he did not want to be late for. When Chief of Police Shane Highwater wanted something done, you got it done. Not out of fear but respect. The man was a freaking hero. Even he had seen the dash cam

video of him taking down a terrorist in a suicide vest, doing it when they were far enough away that no one else would get hurt, yet from close enough to be sure.

Sure both that the man would go down...and that when that vest exploded he would die too. If it hadn't been for a malfunction of the dead man switch, that would have been what happened, and Shane Highwater had done it anyway. And Logan doubted there was anyone who'd been in Last Stand any length of time who wouldn't jump when the man called.

Even if it was to repair a jail cell.

When he got there and found the big, solid metal door hanging by the bottom hinge, he stared at the jailer.

"I don't think I want to know," he said.

"A drunk the size of a gorilla. Some idiot from Austin," the man said sourly.

"Well, that's a redundancy if I ever heard one," Logan muttered, then nearly jumped when a laugh came from close behind him. He spun around to see Chief Highwater grinning at him.

"Truer words never spoken," the man said.

"Sir," Logan said respectfully, and shook the chief's hand when he held it out.

"Think you'll be able to get this done today?"

He looked back at the door, saw where the hinge had given way, and that the metal that held it to the frame looked as if it had originally been two pieces where it should have been one.

“I think so. I brought most of what I’ll need, and anything else Nailed It should have,” he said, referring to the hardware store just a block down the street.

“Good,” the chief said, his tone a little wry. “There’s a private party that rented the saloon tonight, and some folks may need a place to sit and sober up before they hit the streets to go home.”

Logan looked at the man, hesitated, then said, “That must be strange. With the saloon being your brother’s, I mean.”

“We’ve reached an accord. He trades a last free drink for their car keys, and is rarely ever turned down.” The chief studied him in turn. “I hear you don’t drink anything other than the lemonade.”

With anyone else Logan would have ended the conversation abruptly. But not this man. “I don’t drink. I didn’t want to... fulfill certain expectations.”

“Wise choice,” Shane Highwater said. “But then, you’re a wise man.”

That was an appellation he’d never expected, but he prized it coming from this man.

“I just see all the trouble it causes.” His mouth quirked. “And I like that peach lemonade they serve.”

“So do I,” the chief said with a grin.

He hesitated again, then gave in to curiosity. “I’ve heard you and Slater didn’t always get along so well.”

“True—and long—story. Typical family stuff. But things are great now.”

Logan was the first to admit he knew nothing about typical family stuff, but he suspected there was more to it than that, simply because they were the Highwaters and nothing was simple.

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He kept thinking about it as he started to work. He knew nothing about families at all, but especially about that kind of family, mother long vanished but a father who stepped up, as Shane in turn stepped up when that father had been tragically killed. A police chief, a saloonkeeper, another brother a detective, a sister who ran their ranch with an iron fist, and a brother who had been gone on his own tragic journey for years before finally coming home.

Home. Was it only where you lived, or was there more? True, he'd built a life here in Last Stand, but was it by choice or because it was where he'd landed? And where Bud had been? He didn't know. And he doubted he ever would.

He finished the job on the door faster than he'd expected, but he knew that solid, strong hinge he'd built would hold. He'd added a base plate that wrapped around the door's edge so solidly and deep it would take a herd of those gorillas to tear it down. He did the same with the lower hinge, just in case. Shane assessed the repair at "about five times satisfactory," which made Logan laugh.

After their talk about the saloon—and the famous peach lemonade—he thought he might stop by before he had to head out to the Baylor place to shoe the newest acquisition for the therapy place. But he wanted to hit the library first. He needed something...engrossing. Something that would corral his mind and keep him from thinking so much about things he couldn't do anything about. Things like a certain female. Things like his attraction to her. It was hardly surprising, of course. She was smart, kind, generous and beautiful.

And she's Jackson Thorpe's sister—don't forget that part.

He didn't want to leave the truck taking up a parking space in the police employee lot, so he drove the hundred or so feet to the library lot, though it felt silly. He got out and headed in. He'd ask Joey. She'd know what might work. And he wouldn't have to go into detail with her, he could just say he needed a serious distraction and she'd understand.

Joey, being still her mentally efficient self even if she was getting a bit more awkward at moving as her pregnancy advanced, had a list for him in moments. He went in search of the titles she'd suggested that sounded interesting and picked the one where he caught himself still standing there reading by the time he hit chapter two. He grabbed another book on the list in case this one fell apart later and started back toward the checkout desk. Where Joey was standing, smiling at someone across the counter. Someone wearing a snugly fitting pair of jeans and a matching sleeveless denim jacket. Someone with a gorgeous fall of hair the color of autumn leaves, going halfway down her back.

Tris.

He knew it the instant he saw her, well before Joey spotted him and said something. It gave him a half-second to brace himself before she turned to look. He had his jaw set and his expression steady by the time he had to look her in the eye. Those deep, blue eyes.

She smiled. Widely. Almost...thankfully? No, that made no sense. Why would she—

She started toward him, walking quickly. So quickly he couldn't figure out how to dodge. She was still smiling in that breath-stealing way when she came to a halt in front of him. Close. Too close.

"I saw your truck, so I hoped you were here," she said, library quiet and still with that smile. But now he saw her lips tremble a little, as if she were having to force them to

stay in that smile. As if she were covering up her real feelings. Was she still mad at him?

It was crazy. He'd been content with his life, if not happy. He wasn't sure he even knew how to be happy, or what it would feel like if he was. But he'd felt things he'd never felt before when he was with her, things that had him wondering if maybe this was what it felt like, that happy thing. He didn't—

“Would you come to Java Time with me and let me buy you a coffee?”

He blinked. What? She wanted to buy him coffee? And then what? Hang around while he drank it? Drink one of her own?

“I really need to talk to you, and—” she gestured at their surroundings “—well, library.”

He blinked again. Started to open his mouth to speak but stopped when he realized he had no idea what to say.

“Come on, so Joey can get you checked out.”

He wasn't even sure how he ended up outside and strolling down Main Street toward the coffee shop, books in hand. Well, one book, anyway. Tris had taken the other to look at, saying she hadn't read it and was curious. He found himself watching her intently, only enough attention on the sidewalk to keep from running into anyone.

“Intense,” she said as they reached Java Time and she handed it back to him. “Looks fascinating, but definitely not light reading.”

“That's what I wanted. I needed to stop—”

He cut himself off before he said something stupid. Instead he opened the door and held it, then followed her in. For the moment they were the only customers, although he doubted that would last long.

“Same as before?” she asked as they reached the counter.

The memory of the first time they’d come in here was blazed into his mind indelibly. What he’d drunk that day was not. He remembered her frothy, creamy-looking drink, but not a thing about what had been in his own cup. He assumed it was his usual plain black coffee so said, “Sure.”

She didn’t speak to him again until they were seated, at the same table they’d ended up at before. And when she did, she once more caught him off guard. “You needed to stop what?”

He should have known she wouldn’t forget. “Thinking too much,” he muttered.

She laughed, gesturing at the books he’d set on the table. “I imagine those would have the opposite effect. That’s some pretty deep history.”

He shrugged it off, not wanting to admit it was thinking about her he wanted to stop. Then he saw her take a deep breath and, oddly, appear to brace herself.

“I wanted to say how sorry I am.” He drew back, surprised. But she kept going. “I had no right to say what I said to you yesterday. Or to say it the way I did. I have no idea how a person would or could cope with the start in life you had, but obviously you’ve done it, and done it well, so I had no business mouthing off as if I had a clue. So, I apologize. Fervently.”

He stared at her. Realized his jaw had dropped and snapped it shut again. His fingers tightened around the coffee cup as if he thought it were going to scramble across the

table and escape. Maybe because that's what he felt like doing. But he could no more leave right now than he could fly.

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And then she reached out and put a gentle hand over his tense ones. “I’m not very good at this anymore,” she said, almost shyly, a demeanor he never would have expected from her.

He shook his head. “That was a hell of an apology.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean...I don’t know how...I haven’t...”

He was still staring at her, because now she was sounding like he imagined he did half the time. Uncertain. Unsure. And that was something he never would have expected from her. And she seemed to realize it, because her mouth—that luscious, tempting mouth—twisted slightly.

“I’m very out of practice being around someone I really like,” she said finally. “Someone I could...more than like.”

His breath jammed up in his suddenly tight throat. And suddenly things she’d said were tumbling through his mind. When she’d jokingly called him Hephaestus, and said the Greek god description would fit. When, after the trip to see the Mustangs of Las Colinas, she’d said it was a darned near perfect day. At the cemetery, when she’d said the originals would be proud to have a man like him stand as they stood.

And she’d been the one to tell Rylan he was perfect to do the buckles. She’d praised his rough hands as working hands, the kind they needed more of.

She’d said his mother hadn’t been good enough for him.

...an amazing human being like you.

He was more than a little stunned, and completely without words now. So instead he did the only thing that seemed right.

He turned his hand slightly, and wrapped his fingers around hers.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Ireally amsorry I was so sharp,” Tris said as she met his gaze. “It just stung so much, both that you were treated that way and that it mattered at all to you what that...that woman thought. If she was capable of thought at all.”

He kept his hold on her hand, and she was glad of it, for the warmth but especially the contact. She’d seen the flash in those green eyes of his when she’d betrayed her feelings, telling him he was someone she could more than like. She didn’t want to read too much into a simple look, but something in the way he was looking at her now enabled her to go on.

“Do you really feel that way, Logan? That what she did somehow makes you...less?”

He lowered his eyes and was silent for a long moment, staring down at their clasped hands as if he’d never seen anything like that before. He started to pull away, but she held on, remembering what he’d said about his hands, these strong, working hands, being too rough to touch her.

Finally, he spoke.

“I...did. When I was little.” He looked as if he was sorry he’d even answered her, but he kept going, with a wry twist of his mouth. “Hard not to when the other kids are calling you Dump, short for dumpster.”

She made a little sound, not quite managing to stifle the pained gasp that rose to her lips. As a teacher, she knew how cruel some kids could be, but that didn't make this any easier to hear. She quickly lowered her gaze to the table. And their hands. When she thought she could without the gleam of tears in her eyes showing, she looked back up at him.

“Is it too much to hope you trounced them when you weren't so little anymore?”

His head raised sharply. He stared at her as if shocked. Then, slowly, he smiled. And it relieved the tightness in her chest. “That isn't very teacherly of you,” he said.

“No, but it's honest. I hate bullies.” She tilted her head as she studied him, wondering if she dared say what she was feeling. “On the other hand, perhaps I shouldn't be so vengeful since they were part of what made you who you are.” She threw caution to the wind and went on. “And I quite like who you are.”

There was a moment when he didn't speak, but his fingers tightened around hers. He looked down again, as if drawn to stare at their hands. Then, in a tone she'd never heard from him—low, rough, almost husky—he said, “Be careful.”

“Of what?”

“Of making me think things I shouldn't be thinking.”

“What things, and why shouldn't you?”

“Things I've never had and never will.”

Driven by an urge she suspected was more than a bit reckless, she shifted her hand, moving her fingers around to the underside of his wrist. She pressed slightly, until she felt the strong—slightly rapid, or was she kidding herself?—beat of his pulse.

“You’re still alive,” she said softly. “You can’t say never.”

His head came up again. “Is that how you feel?”

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“I didn’t, always,” she admitted. “Even though David kept telling me.”

He blinked. “He did?”

It was difficult, because she didn’t talk about this often, but it felt necessary now, with this man. “When we knew...he was terminal, he told me I needed a motto to remember, after. And he chose ‘Honor the past, but don’t live in it.’ Maybe that idea would help you, too.”

She thought he took in a deep breath, then knew she was right by the way he slowly let it out.

“I don’t know if I’m tough enough.”

She couldn’t help it, she let out a laugh. “You? The man who could be the prototype for building a life on wreckage?”

He stared at her. Then he shifted his gaze to the table again, but she could see the slight upward tug at the corners of his mouth. That mouth she wanted to kiss, an urge she’d once been certain she would never feel with any man other than David. And it was so strong it had her wondering what he would do if she leaned over the small table and did it. Kissed him, here, in public, and no doubt setting the Last Stand grapevine on fire with it.

She’d never been one to make the first move, but with Logan she was thinking she might have to be. Because he wouldn’t believe it, otherwise.

But then a group of a half-dozen chattering people came through the door, and their isolation—that word again—was shattered. And Logan tensed slightly but didn't look around. Instead he glanced at his watch—she'd noticed before he was not glued to a phone screen—and looked a little startled.

“I have to get to a job.” And then, as if he felt he needed to explain, he added, “For your brother, actually.”

Did he think she needed an explanation? That she wouldn't believe him without it? Or was he used to thinking up excuses to get away, and didn't want her to think he was doing that this time?

She laughed inwardly at herself. It had been a long time since she'd expended so much time and energy on trying to figure out one person. With David she had instinctively known, which made it easier. But somehow she was finding the challenge of understanding Logan Fox interesting. Even...exhilarating? Now that was something she'd never expected. Nor had she expected to find the quiet, almost withdrawn man so...so...appealing?

Girl, you've gone way beyond appealing. Admit it, you're hot for him, in a way you never, ever thought you'd feel again.

Nor had she ever expected to find herself thinking, with any kind of seriousness, that maybe them constantly running into each other wasn't just accident or coincidence.

That maybe, just maybe it was fate.

*

Logan gave the hoof one more swipe with the rasp, then straightened and released the mare's foreleg.

“She should be good now,” he said.

Jeremy Thorpe smiled happily. “Can she have the carrot now?”

“She’s earned it,” Logan agreed, and moved his gear out of the way so the boy could get to the docile little bay. He backed up to stand beside the boy’s father.

“Thanks,” Jackson said. “I think she’s going to be a good one for the smaller kids.”

“Yes.” Logan nodded toward the boy eagerly feeding the chunks of carrot to the horse. “I like how involved he is.”

“It’s helping him as much as the clients, so I’ll happily take it.”

Logan looked up to meet those Hollywood-famous eyes. Eyes that were also passed on to his sister. “You’re doing a good thing here,” he said quietly.

“I hope so. Sometimes I worry it’s just making me feel good,” Jackson confessed.

Logan shook his head. “No. You’re helping kids who were where your son was. You understand in a way somebody who hasn’t been through it never could.”

Jackson studied him for a moment, and Logan had the thought that the cameras had never really captured the power of that intense gaze.

“Tris understands,” Jackson said softly.

Logan tensed, but said only, “Yes she does.”

“I worry about her. A lot.”

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Since he knew it was true, Logan said the only thing he could think of. “I think she knows that.”

Jackson’s mouth quirked slightly. “Well, you would know. She’s spent more time with you than anyone in the last six weeks.”

Logan blinked. “I...” His voice trailed off as he looked at the famous face. Was he about to get told off? Warned to stay away from Jackson Thorpe’s sister? He’d completely understand it, if so. After all, who’d want a sister he loved tangled up with a guy who didn’t even know where or what he came from?

Tangled up? Is that what it is? Or was that only his thoughts and...response to her?

He felt a hand gripping his shoulder, and he looked back at Jackson. “It’s the best thing that’s happened to Tris in a long time. You’re the best thing.”

Me?

He was sure he was gaping, but he couldn’t help it. He scrambled for something, anything, to say. Found nothing.

“I understand what she’s going through,” Jackson said. “Better than most. But it’s been a long time now.”

“She...loved him.” And would only ever love him.

“I know she did. And I know it’s different for everyone. But I’m tired of watching her

sail along in a damaged ship, instead of at least trying to build a new one.”

The analogy caught Logan’s full attention. For a moment he just looked at Tris’s brother, then he said quietly, “Like you did?”

Jackson grimaced. “Maybe that’s why. I never thought I could, either. But Nic proved me wrong.” He smiled then. “Very, very wrong. For which I will be eternally grateful.”

Logan couldn’t help smiling back.

And then, in a low voice that nevertheless struck like a blow to the gut, Jackson added, “And I’d be grateful again, Logan, if you could help Tris do the same.”

He stared at the other man. Tris’s brother.

Who it seemed, had just given Logan his full stamp of approval.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tris wasn’t sure if she was glad she’d stopped at Kolaches, the bakery, or not. But as usual, she hadn’t been able to resist the scent of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls. She was a bit nervous about tomorrow, and the ceremony the town council had asked her to speak at, and decided it would take something that luscious to calm her nerves.

So she headed for the door, and had walked in on Lark. Which had led to sitting at one of the small outside tables, consuming one of those luscious rolls with the woman she’d wanted to talk with again anyway. Sort of.

And with her usual perceptiveness, Lark started it. “How’s Logan?”

“I...okay, I think.” She grimaced, thankful they were the only ones here at the moment. “I had to apologize to him yesterday. I got upset with him for focusing so much on his...beginning, instead of the amazing guy he is now.”

Lark studied her for a moment. “Can I deduce from that that you know more about his history now?”

She nodded. “He told me. About how they found him.”

“The dumpster, you mean?” Tris gave her a surprised look. Lark smiled. “If you already know, then I’m not giving anything away. And—” her smile turned a bit wry “—after we spoke I confess, I did a little digging. I don’t know a lot more, and what I do know is not pretty.”

“I don’t know how a toddler found in a dumpster could be anything else. But if there’s more you can tell me, I’d appreciate it.”

“Maybe a bit. It was in *The Defender*, and there was a lot of public buzz about it back then it seems. Everybody knew. Even before all you had to do was a web search, Last Stand’s grapevine was up and running wild about the child found out on Yellow Rose Road at the construction site.”

“Was he...hurt?”

Lark nodded again. “Not badly then, but from the bruises and scars, regularly, for a long time. No question it was abuse. Maybe since he was born.”

Tris fought down a wave of nausea. An image of Logan’s face formed in her mind, and the scar she’d noticed running along the left side of his jaw. Was that one of the marks he carried, from that time? Had it not been a fractious horse as she’d always assumed, but some hideous, ugly human who had given him that mark to carry?

“Did they ever find who abandoned him?”

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Lark shook her head, her expression sad. “No. Of course, searching for such things wasn’t as easy then as it is now. Which brings me to the one other thing I know, which is that when he was older, when that kind of search got more efficient through DNA, they offered him the chance to try and find at least his mother. He said no.”

Tris let out a long, pained breath. “I don’t blame him.”

“Nor do I.”

“She—they—don’t deserve him anyway.”

For some reason that made Lark smile. “I can think of someone who does deserve the man he’s become, though.”

Tris felt heat rising in her cheeks. Sometimes Lark was too darned observant. Or maybe she was just too darned obvious.

She mulled over what she’d learned as she walked on toward the library, her original destination. It seemed a bit busy for a midday Thursday, but as much as she treasured the quiet she also liked to see people here, using this marvelous resource. An up-to-date, fully connected facility in an old, Texas stone building just made her feel good. Like things could grow and change and adapt without losing what they’d originally been.

But she seemed to be having trouble focusing today, and after chatting with the young man covering the desk for a moment, spent more time than usual searching for something that grabbed her interest.

At least, something that would keep her from endlessly going over that horrible story Lark had told her. No wonder Logan was a bit prickly, and a lot withdrawn. He had every reason and right to be.

It was sometime later that she looked up, and her breath caught when she realized who had come in.

Something had changed.

Tris had no idea what it was, but Logan was...different. Not happier, really, but...lighter. As if a burden had been lifted from him. Or he'd gotten good news. She could tell even from here, a library aisle away.

She watched him, covertly, telling herself it was silly to think that that odd tickle she'd felt at the back of her neck a moment ago had been because of him coming into the building. But she had to admit she'd felt nothing like it before, and a half-dozen people had come and gone already while she'd been here.

Not to mention he looked...great. In a pair of black jeans that looked almost new, a green knit shirt that made his equally green eyes seem to glow, and shiny black boots that showed none of the wear and tear of his work, he looked like a guy who had taken some care. She wondered if he had an appointment with a new client or something.

Or maybe a date?

She didn't want to think about that. Because the emotion that jabbed at her at the thought felt like nothing less than jealousy. She felt almost...possessive about him, and she had no right.

He paused at the desk, spoke briefly to the assistant librarian there—Joey, the woman

had told her, was at her obstetrician's office this morning—who smiled and nodded at whatever he'd said. He turned and scanned the rest of the library. She knew he couldn't see her, since she'd been watching through the narrow space between the eye-level books in front of her and the shelf above. Yet, decision apparently made, he started toward her.

As if he'd guessed where she would be.

Well, the history section. No big surprise there.

Still, when he came to a halt in front of her, she couldn't help but smile at him. It was when he smiled back that she seemed to forget how to breathe.

Yes, something had definitely changed. She'd never seen this kind of openness, this obvious cheer in Logan's face and demeanor.

"You look like someone who got good news," she said.

"I did, in a way," he said.

"I'm glad." She beat back the urge to ask him what it was. "Looking for something?" She gestured at the bookshelves she knew better than most, wondering what he was here for this time.

"Already found it," he said. And he was looking at her.

"Logan." It was all she could manage to get out.

"Can we go someplace quiet to talk?"

She refrained from pointing out they were in a library. She had the feeling he'd meant

private as much as quiet. Or maybe she was just hoping that was what he'd meant. She steadied herself, took a deep breath, then the plunge.

"My place is only a block away."

She knew he knew that, since he had, in fact, been there once before. Sort of. He hadn't wanted to come in then. She'd told herself it was because they were ready to leave to go see the Mustangs of Las Colinas. Then she'd wondered if he just didn't want to get any more personal with her than he already had.

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A memory suddenly struck her, triggered by the thought of the mustang sculptures. If they went to her place, he'd see the photo. He'd see it, because she'd had it printed, and it was propped up on the kitchen counter, where she could look at it any time. She'd taken a lot of pictures that day, the running, splashing horses from all distances and angles. But only one of the pictures so far was one she wanted to look at all the time. It was of one of the babies of the small herd, who seemed too small to be making the leap off the edge into the water below. And beside the bronze foal crouched Logan, one hand gently touching the little one's flank, as if he were a live one who needed his calming touch.

The moment she'd captured that image she'd known it would be special. She hadn't counted on the strange feeling it gave her. But she knew she would treasure it, as a reminder of that day, that visit, and the man who, at the time, she'd doubted would be in her life for long.

And here they were, almost a month later, heading for...she wasn't sure what.

She told herself not to get her hopes up. He could just be wanting to talk about Jeremy, or Jackson, or something else he didn't want to broadcast to Last Stand in general, or risk it getting to the grapevine and thus known far and wide.

He left his truck—was there any private vehicle in Last Stand that was more recognizable than that truck?—there and they started walking toward her house. Her half of the duplex, anyway. She had new neighbors in the other half as of last week, and they were taking their time settling in. The noise at all hours was beginning to get on her nerves, and she was starting to worry that it wasn't just settling in, that they were just...noisy. That would teach her not to worry about the quiet, because now that

it seemed to be gone, maybe permanently, she craved nothing more.

She didn't think she imagined that moment of hesitation before he stepped through her doorway. She saw him looking around the main room, and kept watching, curious to see where his gaze would snag. He seemed to notice her office alcove first, then the portrait of the wall of Jackson, Leah and Jeremy. She saw the slightly sad smile that curved his mouth.

"I'm going to have to get a new photo," she said quietly. "So I always know he's as happy now as he was then."

The sadness in his expression faded, and when he met her gaze he nodded. "They are happy."

"Yes." A smile curved her mouth, as it did every time she thought of how true that was. "Living proof," she added in a tone just above a whisper, more to herself than him. Proof that it could happen. But then, Jackson had always been braver than she was, plus he had Jeremy to be worried about, so it was little wonder he'd moved on. While she herself had languished in her unchanging life, the move to this place the biggest change she'd managed on her own.

At least, until now.

Even as she thought it, a loud thump followed by a child's squeal came from the adjoined unit, seeming only slightly muffled by the wall between. She rolled her eyes.

"Maybe we should have gone to your place," she said wryly as she walked into the kitchen. "I envy you the quiet."

When she glanced at him, he was staring at her again, but this time as if in shock. "You...do?"

“Absolutely. My new neighbors are a bit loud. And there’s a lot of local traffic, relatively speaking. Plus, there are times when I come home from a tough day amid dozens of energetic, noisy kids and I’d give anything for that kind of peace and...separation.”

“I would have thought it was too isolated for you.”

“If I want to be around people I know where to find them,” she said dryly. “Coffee? There’s some left in the pot but it’s a couple of hours old, so I can put on fresh—”

She stopped when he shook his head. “Two hours old sounds about right.”

She got down two mugs, and was filling them when he said, in a tone that seemed half statement, half question, “You’d need a lot nicer place than mine, though.”

She looked up, saw he was looking around her living room again.

“No,” she said. “This decor is just...window dressing. Bought from a picture on a website. At the time all I wanted was to get away from the painful memories the old house held.”

She set the mugs on the counter, got her creamer out of the fridge for her own coffee, but remembering he took it black didn’t offer it to him. But she set it within reach in case her home brew wasn’t to his liking.

“If I’d been thinking straight, I would have realized I needed more privacy.”

“I definitely have that.”

He took a sip. He didn’t grimace or gag, so she guessed it must have been acceptable. Or his tolerance was high, because it was a bit too strong now for her. But a little

more creamer would fix that.

For a long moment silence reigned, although his words were echoing in her head. Not the ones about wanting to talk, although that had ratcheted her tension up a bit. No, it was his answer to her question that had her rattled.

Looking for something?

Already found it.

And she couldn't deny that he'd been looking steadily—no, intensely—at her when he'd said it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The only reason he could be here, Logan realized, was because David Carhart had never set foot in the place. He couldn't even imagine being in the home they'd had together. He didn't even know where it had been, and he didn't want to know.

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For a moment his resolve wavered. How did you battle someone who no longer existed? A ghost? Especially knowing he'd been a man who could give his wife everything any woman could want. Not just wealth—he knew Tris wasn't impressed with that from the stories Jackson had told of how she kept his success from going to his head—but brains, class, and the respect of an entire community.

He managed—barely—not to stare at the photograph on the far wall that had been one of the first things he'd noticed. Tris looked much the same now, although with that shadow that darkened her eyes now and then. Carhart had been older but looked enraptured in the picture. Who wouldn't be, about to have that woman as his wife?

He quickly shifted his focus to the other large picture, the one of Jackson and Jeremy, and his late wife. A lot of tragedy in a single family. Was that worse than having had no family at all?

His ricocheting thoughts next hit the image hanging in his workshop, of him and Bud. He'd always thought because he hadn't had a family like other people he'd escaped the kind of grief Tris had felt, twice in her life. But now, standing here, he caught himself wondering if—

“What? What is it you're thinking right now?”

Her voice was gentle, but urgent. When he looked at her, when he looked into those eyes, he couldn't not answer. “I...was back on Tennyson.”

“Would you really rather see a bare wall? Because there was nobody you ever loved to remember? Not even Bud?”

How did she do that? How did she know where his mind had gone? Was he that obvious, or was she just a mind reader?

“No. No. It was worth the pain of losing him to have had him in my life.”

“Especially since he was the only one who ever really gave a damn about you? In the way family does?” She grimaced. “Sorry. Or should,” she amended.

“You don’t have to apologize. It doesn’t matter that much anymore. It stays where it belongs, buried, most of the time.”

She reached out and laid a hand on his forearm. She did it gently, almost caressingly, yet it sent a jolt of sensation through him that nearly left him breathless.

“I’m glad.”

He took another swallow of coffee, not knowing what to do or say to that. He glanced around again, unable to deny he was curious about this place she lived, yet didn’t seem to like all that much. Another screech and a loud adult response from next door made him look back at her. She shrugged and gave an eye-roll, as if to say “See what I mean?”

The coffee maker hissed, and she went over to turn it off. He found himself watching her every move, because he couldn’t seem to help himself. When she turned to come back, he immediately turned his head, to avoid being caught staring at her. Again.

But when he did he saw the photograph on the counter beside the coffee maker, propped against the wall. He recognized the location immediately, and started to smile at the image of the tiny horse trying to navigate a leap that seemed too much for it.

The expression froze on his face when he realized that was him in the image, crouched beside the little bronze creature, his hand resting on the withers. He remembered the moment, when he'd felt that urge to reach out and reassure the foal, even in this inanimate form. He'd felt a little silly, but wrote it off to the consummate skill of the brilliant artist. He'd never realized she'd been watching him. Certainly never realized she'd taken a photo.

And even if he had, he would never have expected her to have it here, in plain sight, where she would see it...every day.

His gaze shot back to her. She'd clearly seen where he was looking. He thought he saw a slight tinge of color in her cheeks, but maybe he was imagining it.

"I had such a good time that day," she said, her voice soft and holding an undertone he couldn't name but that sent a ripple of heat through him.

"So did I." He barely got out the words. All he could think was if she had a good time that day, then maybe he wasn't as crazy as he'd thought to show up to ask her what he had in mind.

She tilted her head in that way she had that seemed both curious and assessing. She hesitated for a moment, then said, "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

He hesitated, then went for it. "Remember that book we picked up at the museum at Fort Sam Houston?" He waited, more tensely than the question ordinarily would deserve.

"The one about the Revolution?" He nodded. "I do remember. It was fascinating, with some angles I'd never thought of before. And he mentioned Last Stand, so I was sold," she said, with a wide smile.

He took a breath, and then let loose the words he'd actually practiced before coming here. "The author's going to be speaking at the bookstore in town this Saturday afternoon. I thought...wondered if...maybe you'd like to go." The rest, the truly important part, came out in a rush. "And we could have dinner after."

For a too-long moment she just stared at him. He was about to give up hope when a slow, sweet smile curved her mouth—that mouth—and she almost seemed to light up. "I would like that. Very much. Especially the dinner part."

He felt a rush of relief. And sent a silent thank you to her brother for giving him the nerve to even try.

Now he had nearly two days to steel himself. Not just to tidy himself up as he had today to ask her, but to work himself up to where he could be at least coherent on Saturday, maybe even interesting. Both of those he could and had managed.

He just hadn't done it sitting across a table from Tris Carhart.

As it turned out it wasn't a matter of steeling himself, it was a matter of stopping himself from backing out of the whole thing. On Saturday morning he found himself backtracking in time, remembering that day he'd encountered her shortly before her husband's death. He'd never formally met her then, but everyone in Last Stand knew who she was. And the pain in those eyes of hers had been so deep, so harrowing, it sliced through his shields. So he had said the only thing he could think of. And it had meant something to her. Enough that she remembered it even now, all this time later.

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Another thought hit him then. That had been seven years ago. So technically, he'd known her for that long. And now it was seven weeks since the day they'd collided in the barn at the Baylor ranch, which he now sort of thought of as when this—whatever it was—had started. That seemed significant somehow.

He got ready as best he could. Choosing what to wear wasn't difficult—he only had so much that wasn't worn or singed. So he went with the black jeans and the gray shirt with the pearl snaps that the clerk at Yippee Ki Yay had told him went with his hat. He'd made reservations for later at Valencia's, the best Tex-Mex restaurant in town, and had been lucky enough to have Elena Highwater answer the phone. The woman was kind, understanding, and above all tactful. She seemed to guess it was a special occasion, and suggested a table in the alcove, set somewhat away from the usual Saturday night crowd.

When he arrived at Tris's place it took him a moment or two to work up the nerve to even get out of the truck. Long enough that she opened the front door and stepped out before he even got completely up the three steps to the porch. And he almost fell right back down them when he saw her. That black dress she had on was simple, nothing fancy, but it flowed over her in a way that made him need to quash parts of him as they surged to full interest, as they did every time he even thought of her.

He yanked his hat off, belatedly. "You look...amazing." He barely got it out, and he had to clamp his jaw shut before he said something unforgivably stupid.

She smiled, widely. "As do you. I do love that shirt. And don't think I missed the polite hat removal."

He started to breathe normally—well, as much as he ever did around her—again. He was surprised when she suggested they walk. His first gut reaction was that she didn't want to ride in his truck—and he thought, not for the first time, that maybe he needed a second, non-work vehicle—but when they started out into the early evening air and she looked up at the sky and drew in a deep breath, he knew that wasn't it. She just liked looking at the sky.

And she loved looking at the night sky. From your deck.

Steady again, he walked alongside her, adjusting his stride to stay even with her.

“We should stop by Yippee Ki Yay on the way to the restaurant,” she said. “I heard one of Rylan's belts with your buckle is already in the window.”

He blinked. “It is? I only dropped the first two off yesterday.”

She looked up at his face and gave him a smile that nearly knocked the breath out of him. “And he loved them, just as I knew he would. Couldn't wait to get them out there.”

She spoke with such confidence, such certainty. His work had been the one thing in his life he had few doubts about, but he did have them. While Tris apparently did not. And she valued his work, as mundane as most people thought it was.

The book signing was interesting, because the author obviously knew his stuff, and the question-and-answer session after the brief talk was fascinating in itself. Tris had no hesitation in asking questions, and when she did it became almost a conversation between the two of them. It took Logan a bit to realize the twinge he was feeling was a bit of possessiveness. And he gave into it a little when the session ended, walking by to shake the author's hand mainly because he was about Tris's height, meaning a half-foot shorter than him.

They did pause at the window display of the western wear shop. He couldn't quite describe how it felt to see his work there, attached to Rylan Rafferty's brilliance.

"I didn't think anything could add more to Ry's brilliant work, but you did it." Her words were like a blow to his chest, driving the air out of him. "Maybe you should try some of your own someday."

He would have laughed at the idea, if he'd had the breath to do it.

He gave a sharp shake of his head, finally sucked in some air, and they moved on. He liked the fact that she didn't try to fill every moment with talk but seemed content to just walk along in silence. It reminded him of how she'd been so content to just sit on his deck and watch the sky, not needing constant conversation there, either.

Dinner was one of the best he'd ever had. Not only because the food was delicious, as it always was at Valencia's. He was surprised, as he had been from the beginning, at how easy she was to talk to. Not just about the history they both loved, but...anything, it seemed. And when his brain made one of those jumps he'd always been told was weird, like from the explosion of bluebonnets in the spring to the endless sweep of the Milky Way across the sky, she went right along with him, until they ended up in an esoteric sort of discussion he'd never really had with anyone before.

They finished the meal of flavorful, sizzling fajitas far too soon for him; he could have sat there with her for hours. And when they started the four-block walk back to her place, he found himself walking slowly, pausing here and there to look at something that didn't really interest him, just to draw this out.

He didn't want to let her go.

He didn't think he ever would.

When they reached her place, he didn't even look at his truck. Didn't want to acknowledge it was there, and that he'd be in it shortly, driving home. Alone. After some fumbling, awkward goodbye that would likely be the best he could do. Leaving her here, to—

“Will you come in?”

Her soft, quiet question caught him completely off guard. He stared at her in the glow of her porch light. Realized she'd already opened the door.

“I...I'm not sure that would be a good idea.”

“Why?” That same soft, tempting voice.

“Because,” he grated out, “if I come in, I'm not going to want to leave.”

“Time enough to talk about that in the morning.”

She didn't give him time to even react to the shock of her words before she stretched up and kissed him.

He felt like he'd fallen headfirst into his forge at the highest heat. It seared through him, arrowing to every part of him from where her lips were pressed against his. It blew apart his defenses, and he let all his caution fly away with them. He took over the kiss, barely aware they were inside now until he realized he'd pushed the door shut behind them.

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He tasted, savored, but it wasn't enough. He wanted more. He had to have more. She was pressed full length against him now, and it still wasn't enough. He wanted her under him, on top of him, any position he could think of, as long as she was naked and willing.

Willing.

The words came out hoarsely, but he knew he had to say them, had to give her the chance. "This is really what you want?"

"No," she said.

A chill swept over him, so abrupt and sharp it made his gut churn. He should have known, he should have—

"What I wanted was for our first time to be at your place." He stared at her, unable to quite believe this. Any of this. But even he couldn't deny what he saw in her eyes, what he felt in her touch when she cupped his face. "But as long as it happens, I realized it doesn't matter where. Because what I want more than anything is you, Logan."

The words sent a shudder through him, as if every muscle in his body had tensed at that simple statement. The primitive, violently aroused part of his brain screamed at him to give in to the sudden, fierce demand of his body.

Take it, don't be a fool!

But another, saner part of him shouted not to be like whoever his father had been, heedless, careless...

“Tris, I’m not...prepared for this.”

To his shock, she laughed. “Don’t worry. I am. Nic saw to that, when she realized which way the wind was blowing. Although I’m not sure one box of condoms will be enough.”

Nic had known...they’d end up here? He couldn’t think of a damn thing to say.

“I think,” Tris said softly, yet again as if she’d read him and understood, “she saw it because she’d just been there herself.”

“You’re right,” he said hoarsely, pulling her tight against him. “One box might not be enough.”

He hadn’t known it could be like this. But every move, every touch, simply trumpeted how cool, how uninvolved any of his previous encounters had been. Because everything Tris did, running her hands over him, kissing him, only sent that fire rocketing through him again.

They’d been half undressed—and he wasn’t sure who had done who—before the old warning clanged in the back of his mind. He pulled back, feeling he needed to warn her.

“I’ve got...some scars, Tris. More than this.” He indicated the scar across the left side of his jaw, and then the one on his ribs on his left side, from when he’d first been learning and he’d fumbled a glowing chunk of iron.

She didn’t speak. In answer she simply leaned over and kissed the mark. Then she

straightened and finished slipping that slinky black dress off her shoulders, letting it slide to the floor.

The sight of her in nothing but a sleek black bra and panties about did him in right there. And thoughts of anything else faded away as he picked her up in his arms and headed for the door she indicated. He'd never been in her bedroom, and he didn't much care at the moment what it looked like. All that mattered was that the bed was big enough, and he took them both down to it in a rush. He wasn't even sure how he'd gotten out of the rest of his clothes, he only cared that they both be naked, fast.

And it was fast. Only the fact that she urged him on as if she was in as big a hurry as he was let him keep moving as he wanted to. He'd never been hotter, never been harder, never wanted so much.

And when she opened herself to him, when she reached between them to urge him into her, he thought he was going to explode right then and there. Her heat, her slickness, her eagerness undid him, and when he felt the first clenching of her body around him, when he heard her gasp out his name and clutch at him, he let go completely, utterly, for the first time in his life.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tris had known this day was coming. It had been on her calendar for months now. And she had written her own remarks weeks ago, painful as it had been. She had appreciated that Last Stand wanted to do this, but at the same time dreaded it. She could hardly be against the town wanting to acknowledge David's contribution on the ten-year anniversary, but it was David's accomplishment, not hers.

But David wasn't here to receive the accolades, and so she would stand in his stead. And somehow she didn't dread it in the same way she had when they'd first announced it and told her they wanted her to speak. Because today was different. She

was different. At least, she felt that way. And that was, she had no doubts, thanks to Logan. Last night had changed everything. Last night had brought her alive in a way she hadn't felt for so very long. Last night had been...perfect.

She looked at her bed, the sheets still tangled and tossed, and she thought if she went back and lay down she would smell that clean, sage smell that reminded her of him. He'd been tender when she'd needed it, urgent when she'd needed that, gentle yet strong, caring yet a little bit wild when what sparked between them erupted into a fiery explosion.

It had been everything she'd wanted it to be, and more. She'd never felt more alive than she did now. Maybe you had to experience the depth of despair before you could reach that pinnacle.

She'd hated to see him go this morning, but had been thankful he'd understood when she'd said she had a commitment today she couldn't avoid, putting as much as she could of her regret into her voice and the way she kissed him before he left.

As she dressed, she thought about how she felt so much more than ten years older now. Back when they'd completed the school redo, when they'd had the big unveiling, she'd been so young and silly, proud of David and thinking this was just the first of many times when his talent would be celebrated.

And instead, it had been the last.

She gave herself a mental shake. Told herself to focus on the accomplishment. He was gone, but this work would stand for decades as testament to his skill and talent.

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And now she would finally, after seven years, follow his final wishes.

She hadn't looked at that last letter he'd written since she'd locked it away in the box with all the other documents of that time, sealing them out of her life thinking it might seal out some of the pain. It hadn't.

She yawned and stretched, and smiled at the twinge she felt here and there, the reminders of a night spent in pure, beautiful wildness with the only man who'd made her want it in all these years.

And it was that, she supposed, that made her able to say with certainty that today would be her final goodbye. She would always love David, but...she was in love with Logan Fox.

She hadn't told Logan that yet, of course. She was barely used to the idea herself. But last night had put the seal on it, as far as she was concerned.

Whether he would or even could love her back, she didn't know. Yet.

So now she would do this, do it right, with all the tribute David deserved, and then she would move on. Because she'd finally found someone who made her want to.

She went to her desk. Pulled out the locked storage box that held all the "serious stuff" as David used to call it. She opened it and reached in. She didn't have to search for what she wanted. She knew it would be right on top of all the other things, the financial papers, the legal stuff. It was always on top, after all the times she'd gone for it and put it back unread.

But this time she would read it. This time, with painful years of distance between her and the moment it had been intended for, after his death, she would read it.

The moment she saw the familiar handwriting she almost weakened. It was so distinctive, with that flair she'd always assumed was from the artistic part of architecture. She pulled out the envelope and slammed the box shut again. And locked it again, putting another layer between herself and chickening out. Even with all her determination she still sat there unmoving for a long moment.

The first lesson she got, just looking at her name in David's familiar hand on the envelope, was that it hadn't gotten any easier to read through tears. The second was that, while she was crying, it wasn't the desperate, near-hysterical sobbing of the first—and only—time she'd read this. The ache, the pain was still there but it was now a dull sort of sadness, for all the experiences missed, for the pain he'd gone through, and how hard he'd fought to stay with her.

She realized now that this letter, written when the cancer had returned and they'd been told this was it, wasn't just for her, it had also been for him. He'd been dealing with this the best way he knew how, which was head-on. He'd been working through to acceptance and, David-like, he wanted to help her do the same.

She thought again about the future, about the time she'd spend doing things she loved with the man she now loved. She braced herself, and pulled out the letter.

It wasn't that it didn't still hurt to see that once so familiar hand, or that it was shakier here than it had ever been because he'd been so weak. It did hurt, but this too was different somehow. The tears that welled up in her eyes still stung, but they were brought on by a feeling of sadness, not the ripping, agonizing grief she'd been all too familiar with. She would always be sad, she knew. There was no way you could love someone the way she'd loved David and not always feel an ache thinking of how his life had been cut short. But she also felt a touch of pride at all he'd accomplished in

thirty-five short years.

She unfolded the sheet of paper, even managing a smile at his need to do things by hand in an electronic age. He'd always handwritten things, especially notes to her, and she'd treasured it even before she'd known how short a time they would have together.

To Mrs. Trista Thorpe Carhart, my love, my heart~

It's 3 AM, and I fear the end we both know is coming will be here soon. I'm watching you doze in that uncomfortable chair, in this noisy place that never really sleeps. Do not think I don't know that you've not left my side since I landed here for the final phase of this battle. The battle I will lose soon—I can sense that.

There are two things I want you to know. The first is, if it was offered that I could live a hundred years longer, only I had to do it without ever meeting or knowing you, I would say no. Not for anything, even more years, would I give up having had you in my life.

The second thing will be harder if I know you, and I do. Eventually, when this is over and some time has passed, you must move on, Tris. You're too alive, too vital, too wonderful to waste too many of your own years grieving the ones I did not have. And please, please, when you do, when you perhaps find that man who can put joy back into your heart again, don't hesitate. Consider it my last hope, my final wish, that you find happiness again. I cannot face this passage thinking I'm leaving you to a life of only loss and grief. Live again, Tris. Happily.

Do it for both of us.

I loved you with all my heart.

David

The tears overflowed, the emotions as powerful in this moment as they had been the day she'd first read this. It had been that last past tense that had broken her. This time, it was a simple "The End" to their story.

"I loved you that way too," she whispered as she sat staring at the note.

She let her mind, usually disciplined and steady, run as if it were one of the more rowdy horses Logan dealt with. Her thoughts careened around, bouncing off walls of remembered pain and doors leading to change.

There was a lot of advice in that letter. Whenever she had taken advice from the man who'd written it, she'd never been sorry.

And so she whispered to the night around her, "All right, David. I'm going to try."

She didn't know how long had passed before she folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. She would take it with her today. It was as close as he could get to being there, at this gathering in his honor.

And then she would bring it back here and put it away for good. And concentrate on what was now the most important thing.

She was going to fulfill his last request.

She was going to live again.

Happily.

She didn't make the bed before she left.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

He'd known it would be good. Hell, he'd known it would be great. But he hadn't known just how great, because he hadn't known that level of hot, that level of searing, flying pleasure was even possible.

It wasn't until he looked in the mirror in his bathroom that he realized he was grinning. He should have noticed just from the muscle strain, since it wasn't exactly his normal expression.

That she'd even wanted him like that, that it had been her idea, and she'd been so certain every step of the way despite him giving her—dreading it every time—chance after chance to change her mind, was hard enough to accept.

What it had become, that firestorm of sensation that had peaked at a height he'd never been to before, was unbelievable. Even now it didn't seem possible.

A slight smile curved his mouth. I guess to be sure we'll just have to do it again. And again. And again and again and again...

He wished they could have done that today, but as one who tried to always honor

prior commitments like the one Tris had said she had today, he understood. He didn't like it, but maybe tonight they could make up for the missed hours today.

I wanted our first time to be at your place...

The words that had so stunned him—both because of her wanting to be at his remote, isolated home, and because she was clearly considering this only the first time—rang in his head again. So maybe tonight, they could manage that. Come back here, where there would be no distractions of any kind, either traffic on the street or noisy neighbors only a wall away. Endless hours of just them, touching, learning, discovering...

He headed out to the shop to pick up the next buckles for Rylan Rafferty. He'd been glad to have the task to do last week, when he'd been psyching himself up for yesterday.

He was grinning again when he realized that, given how little sleep he'd had last night, he should be exhausted. But instead he felt as if he'd pumped a triple shot of espresso, revved up and ready. And his mood was heightened by the response to the test-run buckles, which had already sold.

"I knew you'd get it right," Rylan said when he delivered the new ones. "I've already got the designs for more. Now, we just need to work out how much I owe you."

"You don't have to—"

"Like hell," Rylan said with a wide smile.

"Just supplies, then. I don't need—"

"Shut up, Fox. You don't give away that kind of skill and talent."

Logan was still processing that unexpected compliment when the man who had become famous came back from his studio and handed him a check he thought had an extra zero on it. He was about to protest when Rylan's mother came out of the main house. She came over to them, welcoming Logan with a wide smile.

"Off to the ceremony at Creekbend?" Rylan asked.

She nodded. "I want to be there, if only for Trista."

Logan blinked. Processed the words. Ceremony. Creekbend, the high school. For Tris. It hit him like a multi-car pileup. He'd known about the commemorative ceremony, he'd just forgotten what day it was. It was hard to miss anything of such significance in Last Stand, thanks to that damned grapevine. He should have put it together with Tris saying she had something on her schedule she couldn't skip today, but he hadn't.

Maybe because she shorted out every circuit in your brain last night? Maybe because she fired up nerves you didn't even know you had? Maybe because she nearly blew the top of your head off in her bed?

"So, you off on one of your history jaunts today?" Rylan asked, and it took Logan a moment to realize it was directed at him. He went with the easiest answer.

"I...maybe."

"You should stop by the high school first," Maggie said, in that commanding way of hers that no one in Last Stand could ignore. "To show support. Then you can be off to...where is it this week?"

"Don't know yet," he muttered.

He wasn't even sure how he escaped. Or why, when he reached the T-intersection that would have taken him back home, he went the other way. And ended up on the Hickory Creek Spur headed toward the school.

By the time he got there a sizeable crowd had gathered around the temporary podium that had been put up. A lot of people had turned out to, as Maggie had put it, show support.

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But Tris hadn't even told him this was what she was doing today. Let alone ask if he'd be there.

He stood on the outer edge of the crowd. The mayor, in his usual blowhard style, was yammering about being a part of this project. He probably would have gone on forever if it hadn't been for Mrs. Valencia, the history teacher who at the time had been a big part of lobbying for this project to be done. She may have retired to help her grandson, but she'd lost none of the authoritative vibe that had made her the most respected and sometimes feared teacher on the staff. And when she walked over to the microphone, the mayor shut up.

She began with clearly genuine praise for David Carhart, for being the other force of nature that had gotten this done. By the time she was done, Logan couldn't help admiring the guy. But then she introduced Tris, and that admiration soured fast. The two women hugged on the podium, and then Tris turned to face the gathering.

She was crying. He saw her swipe at her cheeks, but she couldn't wipe away the tremor in her voice as she spoke to the crowd.

"David was one of a kind," she said. "He wasn't just the love of my life, he was brilliantly talented, unstoppably determined, and he loved this town. He went to this school, and he wanted it to be the best it could be. He said once, before he was...diagnosed, that if he never accomplished another thing in his life, this would be enough."

She had to stop, and swipe at her cheeks again. The pure love that had echoed in her shaky voice stabbed Logan to the core. She sounded like what she was, a woman who

loved her husband with all her heart.

Like a woman who would never love anyone else.

She went on, with more praise for a dead man. He felt a slight queasiness in his gut. Was this why she hadn't mentioned this to him, or suggested he come? Did she not want him to know that there was no room in her heart for anyone but her dead husband?

Well, he knew now.

The queasiness developed into outright nausea. Was this why last night had happened? Had she wanted to maybe put this out of her mind for a while, and he was the handiest way? Or had she needed to verify she still loved her husband by trying with someone else to be sure it wasn't enough?

He didn't want to believe last night was...not a lie, but not what he'd thought—okay, hoped—it was. But he knew too well that not wanting to believe something did absolutely nothing to change the reality.

But even that reality felt like more than he'd ever had in his life. Maybe he should just be satisfied with that, with what she had left in her to give. He'd never in his life expected to be loved, so couldn't he live with simply being liked a lot, as she'd said?

Especially when it came with sex like last night?

Then another thought hit, a horrible one. Maybe...maybe the sex hadn't been as good for her. Maybe he'd been the only one who'd had every circuit blown last night. Maybe it had been nothing special to her. Because nothing could replace what she'd had with the star of today, the man who'd built this.

Especially not a rough-edged, rough-handed guy like him.

He turned away, unable to bear listening to her anymore. He started back toward his truck, threading his way through the gathered observers, there also to salute this man he'd never known but who had managed to shipwreck his life anyway.

No, it's your own fault. You should have known better. A woman like Tris is not for you. You should never have even thought—

His last dodge missed the woman who'd swerved into his path, but it made him thump pretty solidly against the man standing to one side, watching the goings on. The man barely moved despite the collision.

"Sorry," he started to say, then, when he realized who it was added respectfully, "Chief."

Police Chief Shane Highwater nodded in understanding. "Mrs. Morrow's like a running back in a crowd. Speaking of which, you look in a bit of a hurry yourself."

"I...am." And please don't ask why. There was just something about the man that made it almost impossible not to answer when he asked you something. No doubt came in handy, in his position.

The chief's steady gaze seemed locked on him, and Logan had the sudden wild thought that maybe he didn't have to ask. And in the end, he didn't. He asked something else.

"What historical site are you off to today?"

Relieved that this was the question rather than why he was scampering away from this tribute ceremony like a frightened rabbit, Logan said the first thing that came into

his head.

“I’m thinking the Alamo.”

The chief’s gaze flicked in the direction of the podium, then back to Logan. “Different kinds of heroes,” he said quietly, “but all brave when it came to the end.”

Braver than he would ever be, Logan thought as the chief touched the brim of his hat in acknowledgment and went back to watching the crowd. While he not quite ran for his truck. And when he was in the driver’s seat, breathing more calmly again, he thought of the irony of his own answer.

He’d heard David Carhart had been brave. Had faced his personal fight with courage. But he at least had had a chance, and the battle had bought him more than a year with the woman he loved. Those men at the Alamo had never had a chance. Yet they, too, had fought. For thirteen days they had held off a force fifteen times their size.

He remembered an old country song about the place, about going there to breathe the mighty dust of heroes lost. And in that moment his impulsive answer to Chief Highwater made sense, as if on some level he’d already decided.

He started toward home, to grab a few things before he headed south to San Antonio. And as he went he thought about the other bit from that old song that had struck him, the bit about wondering if something in the air at the place made the timid braver there. He could use a little of that right now, to face the apparent fact that he’d misinterpreted everything with Tris.

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Those who had fought there had likely known they had no chance, and had paid the ultimate price for their bravery. Maybe that's what he needed to be around, to remember.

Because compared to their fight, his own simple case of being a fool, of reaching for something he never had a chance at, didn't seem to matter much.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tris was at a total loss. She'd called Logan and he hadn't answered. Texted him and got the same, no response. She'd driven all the way out to his place to find him and his truck gone. If it hadn't been Sunday she'd have gone to the library looking for him. In fact, she stopped by anyway, wondering if they were having some special Sunday function as they sometimes did, which allowed people to come inside on a day they were normally closed. Nothing.

She sat in the parking lot of the closed building, tapping her finger restlessly on the steering wheel. She didn't know for how long. And she didn't know what to do. They hadn't made any formal plans to connect this afternoon, but she had assumed they would.

She assumed that, after last night, how could they not?

She shivered a little, remembering. She'd never experienced anything like it. She and David had had a relaxed, loving relationship.

Logan Fox set her on fire.

Was she expecting too much too soon, to know where he was every day? Maybe. But she wanted to know, and that was something she hadn't felt about anyone except her brother and nephew in a long time.

But that didn't mean Logan necessarily felt she had the right to know. Maybe one night together didn't grant her that, in his mind. Even if it was the night she discovered just how alive she still was.

But what about all the rest of the time they'd spent together? The common bonds they'd found in their love and respect for history, in their preference for seclusion, their appreciation for quiet time spent together, when constant chatter was unnecessary and unwanted? Didn't that count, too? Or had she misjudged its value, to him anyway?

A sudden memory flashed into her mind, of Logan explaining to a curious Jeremy how forging iron for horseshoes worked. He'd showed the boy how, as the iron got hotter, it first glowed red, then orange, then yellow, and finally became white-hot. The forging heat, the point at which you could actually make a shoe that would last, was a bright spot between orange and yellow.

Last night they'd gone straight through to white-hot. Maybe because they'd already been at the red stage before they'd even begun. At least, it had felt that way to her.

You can't use white-hot iron to do anything. It won't hold.

Logan's words rang in her head now. Was that it? Had they been so white-hot they'd...what, burnt out? In one night?

Or maybe she was just so out of practice she'd misread him, misread everything, entirely. Maybe—

A tap on the driver's window startled her out of the morass of thought she'd sunk into. When she saw who it was, she put the window down immediately.

"Chief Highwater," she said, a little startled.

"Just checking to be sure you're okay. You've been sitting here a while."

She stared at the man. Realized that the library was in plain view of the police station, which was in the same central block. And how like him, when he could have easily ordered someone else to do it, to come check on her himself.

"I just wanted to be sure you were okay," he said again when she didn't speak. "This morning must have been a bit of a strain on you."

"Oh." The ceremony. Now she understood. She hadn't seen him there, but she should have known he would be. Last Stand was his to protect, and he took the job very seriously. And she felt a sudden need to show her appreciation. "Have I ever told you how lucky I think Last Stand is to have you?"

He let out a half-chuckle that sounded embarrassed. "I could say the same to you," he said. "So, you're all right?"

"I'm fine. I admit, I'd be better if I could find someone who seems to have fallen off the map, but it went well this morning, and...it's over now. Time to move on."

The perceptive chief studied her for a moment. "I get the feeling you mean that in more ways than one."

"I do."

He nodded, approvingly. "Who is it you're looking for? Anybody we might have

seen around? I can ask.”

She hesitated, but then admitted it. “Logan Fox.”

Chief Highwater’s brow furrowed. “Hmm. Haven’t seen him since this morning at the ceremony.”

Her breath caught. She hadn’t told him about the ceremony, partly because she hadn’t known how to say it, and partly because it was fairly common knowledge in town. She’d always sensed him withdraw a little whenever the subject of David came up, and she hadn’t wanted that to happen, not when they’d finally—she’d thought—taken the next step.

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Or maybe it had also been the last. Maybe it really hadn't been good enough for him to stick around.

"He was...there?" she finally managed to ask.

He gave her a puzzled look. "Yes. He was at the back of the crowd, but he was. I spoke to him briefly."

"Was he...did he seem all right?"

She could hear the tension in her own voice, so she wasn't surprised when the chief picked up on it. "Actually, no. He seemed a little wound up. And he left in a bit of a rush."

Her mind was racing, trying to find a way to ask without sounding...possessive. Controlling, maybe, as if she had the right to know where he was every moment. But once again, the man who was, after all, a trained observer, read her perfectly.

"I'd look south," he said. "He mentioned heading to the Alamo."

Her eyes widened. The Alamo? Why had he felt the need to visit that sacred ground for most Texans, the place where so many heroes had died? It was always on her list, and she always stopped if she was in San Antonio, but she hadn't made a special pilgrimage in a while.

After the chief had headed back to the station, she sat pondering this bit of news. Why would he feel that particular need on this particular day? Why would he make a

visit to the place that had seemed like it would end the fight for independence, yet had become the rallying cry that spirited all the remaining Texans on to a victory that would forever be in the record books, those eighteen minutes at San Jacinto?

What had driven him to seek out that truly hallowed ground?

She needed to know. She had to know. Somehow she sensed this would be the key to at last figuring out the puzzle that was Logan Fox. She started the engine. And at the same time set her mind to working out what she would do when she found him. Because this was new territory for her.

And she didn't like it much.

She finally broke free of the grief, and the man who had made her do it just walks away? Leaves her like last night was just...one of those one-time things? When for her it had been nothing short of a revelation?

No way, Fox.

By the time she was headed due south, she'd worked herself up into what David had called fighting mode. Not to fight with Logan, but with whatever had made him run.

*

There weren't many places where he felt as if he could sense the spirit of the past lingering, as if those who had died here lingered. Yet here, looking at the old mission, staring at the rough, battle-scarred walls, pitted and jagged in spots, it seemed...different. As if they really were still here.

It was a fanciful thought for him, but here, it didn't seem so far-fetched. Why they would stay, he had no idea. Not after the heartbreaking outcome. Or maybe that was

why. Maybe it had been so awful they couldn't process it, and couldn't really leave until they did.

Nearly two centuries later?

He almost laughed at himself. If nothing else could, thinking the spirits of the people who had died here lingered still should be enough to make him realize how far out of whack his mind was at the moment.

So far out that he'd done something he hadn't done since he was a scared kid avoiding a foster parent a little too handy with a belt. He'd run. Unlike the heroes of this sacred ground, he'd run. Maybe that really was why he'd come here. Maybe he figured he might pick up some of that courage, like the song said.

By what, osmosis?

Disgusted with himself, he turned on his heel and strode away from the famous building, foregoing even his usual trip to the museum. He didn't deserve to even be here, in the company of those spirits.

Even if they were imagined.

In the morass his inward-digging mind had become he was apparently not paying any attention to anything around him, because he nearly collided with someone walking the other way.

It was the impossibility of it that made it take a moment for him to realize.

Tris. Here. Right in front of him.

He was probably gaping at her, but he couldn't help it.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

“Hello to you, too,” she said, sounding stung.

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“What are you doing here?”

The edge was still in his voice, and something sparked in those deep blue eyes. As if a fire had been struck. It reminded him of the way she’d looked at him last night. Which reminded him of what that look had begun.

Which hadn’t at all meant what you thought—hoped—it did.

“What more appropriate place, since it seems you want to fight?”

“I don’t want to—”

He cut himself off, shaking his head. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling he had to, because he was having trouble thinking with her standing right there. Which was crazy, because she was all he’d been thinking about.

He tried for something else. “How did you know I was here?”

“Chief Highwater.”

He blinked. “He told you I was here?”

“He said you had it in mind.”

“And you just hopped in your car and drove all this way?”

“Too far to walk,” she said, still with that gleam in her eyes. And as if it were a given

that of course she'd follow him.

Or as if she were spoiling for a fight.

"Tris," he began, then stopped, not knowing what to say.

"So you do remember my name, at least? I've never been a one-night stand before, so I don't know how it works."

He winced and looked away. He'd never seen her like this, this angry, and it rattled him. "You're not...you could never be just...that," he ground out.

"Then why treat me as if I was?"

He looked back at her then. Gradually became aware of the people around them, lots of tourists on this June Sunday, and probably some locals out for a stroll as well.

"You really want to do this here?"

Her chin came up. "What better place to have a fight than at the Alamo?"

He stared at her for a long silent moment. And in that moment he realized a simple, obvious fact. The word for what this had to be. A word he'd never experienced in reality before.

He loved her. It didn't matter that she didn't, couldn't love him, or that sometimes he thought he barely knew what the word meant, he loved her. Nor did it matter that she was obviously steamed at him. He'd grown up with people who seemed perpetually irritated with him. It hadn't mattered to him, with them.

It mattered more than anything with Tris.

He met her gaze, looked into those eyes. She was indeed ready for a fight.

So he said the only thing he could think of. “Then fire away.”

Chapter Thirty

They had walked across the stone-paved street to sit on the short wall that ringed the patch of grass, away from the people gathered in front of the mission. Logan braced himself for whatever she was going to fire at him.

“Why did you run?”

He wanted to deny he had, but he couldn't. Not when it was so obviously true. So he said nothing. And after a moment she went on.

“You show up at the ceremony then vanish, then you don't answer the phone or my texts, you leave town and don't tell me...I'm not saying you owe me constant contact, but a simple 'talk to you later' would have done.”

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He went with the only part of that he had an answer for. “I know you didn’t want me there, so I...left before you saw me.”

She drew back, looking utterly perplexed. “I didn’t want you there? What gave you that idea?”

He shrugged. This, at least, was easy to answer. “You didn’t even mention it to me, let alone ask me to come.”

Her expression changed, softened. “Logan,” she said, and he could almost feel the ache in her voice. “I didn’t ask you because I didn’t want you to feel like you had to come.”

It took him a moment to process that. And no matter how he thought about it, he knew that if she had asked him, he indeed would have felt compelled to come. It had just never occurred to him that that was maybe why she hadn’t asked him. Nobody had ever worried that much about his feelings.

“I know me even talking about David makes you uncomfortable. I can see it,” she said. “I understand, but—”

“It doesn’t. It makes me...envious.” He grimaced. “Which is a hell of a thing to admit about a dead man.”

She was silent for so long, staring across the byway at the mission that had become a monument, that he was afraid this was it, that he’d offended her beyond recovery. He expected any moment now she would say a stiff goodbye, get up and walk away.

But she didn't. Instead she finally looked back at him, and when she spoke it was in a tone he'd never heard from her before. "Contrary to what many think, my life with David wasn't perfect, it was just more than I ever expected to find. We had our moments, like any couple does. I needed time alone, or at least quiet time, and he was always going, talking, being with people. I thought he was so wrapped up in his work everything else sometimes fell by the wayside, and he thought I spent too much time on the past, on history."

He drew back slightly at that, thinking about all the time they had spent together on just that, history. Never once had it occurred to him it was too much time. Nor would it ever.

"See," she said softly, "you understand. About the history, I mean. He never did."

Another minute passed, and he couldn't think of a thing to say. But when she went on he wished he had, wished he'd said something, anything. Because her next words went into territory he avoided at all times.

"Do you think...you're so fascinated with history because you don't know your own?"

"I know all I need to know."

Like that I meant less than nothing to the mother I never knew. That she hated me so much she threw me away. That my father, whoever he was, felt the same. If he even knew I existed at all.

"And none of it's good, is it, Logan? I'm so much luckier than you were."

"Lucky? You loved your husband so much you're still crying for him years after he died, and you think you're lucky?"

A sudden understanding flashed in her eyes. “You think that’s why I was crying at the ceremony?”

His brow furrowed. “Wasn’t it?”

“I was crying,” she said, speaking slowly and clearly, “because I was really saying goodbye to him. Saying goodbye and meaning it, for the first time.”

He stared at her, again at a loss for words. He was starting to hate that part of himself, that fear of speaking at all when it came to...things like this. After a moment of watching him, as if she were reading every bit of what he was feeling, she spoke again.

“Yes, I loved David. I will always love him.” Before he could recoil she went on. “But I’m no longer in love with him. The key word there is with. Because that takes two. David knew that. He told me that, when he told me to move on, but I didn’t really accept it until...recently.”

He was still staring at her, probably looking like an idiot to those passersby that cast glances at them, but thankfully kept going. “He told you...to move on?”

“Yes. He even wrote me—”

She stopped abruptly, a look of realization coming over her face. She suddenly grabbed for her purse, digging into it and coming out with an envelope. She looked at it for a long, silent moment, then handed it to him. He saw her name handwritten across the front, in writing that looked a bit shaky. And suddenly he knew, knew that it had been written by David Carhart. His gaze shot back to her face.

“I brought that with me today as part of my own private ceremony. Of saying goodbye.”

“You don’t want me to read this. I—”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have given it to you.” She managed a slight smile. “And you’re the only one I’ve ever shown it to. Not even Jackson has seen it.”

“But—”

“Please. Read it. And know that I’ve always taken his advice, because when I did, it always worked out.”

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He felt an urge to shove it back at her. He wasn't up to this, he didn't deserve this. But she was looking at him, in that sweet way she had, and he could no more run now than he could turn back time and see those brave men walk out of the Alamo alive.

He read.

By the time he got to the end, he could barely breathe.

...please, please, when you do, when you perhaps find that man who can put joy back into your heart again, don't hesitate. Consider it my last hope, my final wish, that you find happiness again. I cannot face this passage thinking I'm leaving you to a life of only loss and grief. Live again, Tris. Happily.

Do it for both of us.

I loved you with all my heart.

David

Logan Fox could not remember the last time he'd cried. He'd learned early in his life it was useless, and usually brought more hell down upon him. So he'd mastered the ability to hold it in, to never show that sign of weakness he'd always thought it was.

Yet here he sat now, his eyes stinging fiercely as he blinked rapidly to keep tears from streaming down his face. Only the knowledge that they weren't just out in public but sitting across from one of the most famous and popular tourist stops in the country, let alone Texas, enabled him to control it at all, although it took a sharp bite

of the inside of his lip as further distraction. At least the people around them were some distance away, and mostly focused on the Alamo itself.

He handed the letter back to her, but it took him what seemed like a long time to work up to meeting her gaze. Most of it he spent trying to think of something, anything to say. Everything he did think of sounded wrong, clichéd, or full of useless platitudes.

Finally he settled for the only truth he was certain of. “He really loved you.”

“Yes,” she said, and he was a little surprised at how calm she sounded. “And I loved him just as much.” When he didn’t respond, she tilted her head slightly and added, “And if you didn’t notice, that was in past tense.”

“I noticed,” he said, his voice coming out a little rough now.

The silence spun out between them. The longer it went, the more pressure built up inside him. So much that when she finally gave in and spoke, he was so relieved it took a moment for what she’d said to register. And when it did, all the pressure slammed back into him.

“Do you really think I’m so limited I can only ever truly love once?”

His gut knotted and even though he told himself she wasn’t implying what he wished she was, he couldn’t seem to get it out of his head.

“No,” he finally ground out.

And then, when she just sat there watching him, that sweet but a little too knowing, too understanding expression on her face, he couldn’t bottle it up any longer.

“No,” he repeated. He studied his work-roughened hands. “Just that you could never love...me.”

“Well luckily for me,” she said, so cheerfully it completely disconcerted him and his gaze shot back to her face, “you don’t get to decide that. Unless...” Her brow furrowed and she looked worried. “Was last night so...awful?”

Logan’s jaw dropped. Stunned, he stared at her. “Awful? How can you say that? How can you even think that?”

“What else am I supposed to think, the way you took off and went completely silent?”

Suddenly the words he was never able to find were there, erupting in a burst. “I ran because it seemed obvious to me that you still loved...David. And I thought that even though last night was the most incredible, amazing, unbelievable night of my entire life, it was probably not that to you. Maybe just a way to get through. And when I saw you at the ceremony, when I heard you talk about him, I was sure I was right.”

“And now?” she asked softly.

He swallowed tightly. Took in a quick breath. Tried to smile, but was certain it turned out more of a grimace. Couldn’t hold her gaze and had to look away. But finally he pushed the words out.

“Now...I’m not so sure.”

“I should hope not,” she said, rather fervently. “I didn’t hunt you down, didn’t drive all this way just on the chance you were here, because last night was anything less than the same thing for me.”

His gaze snapped back to her face. He gazed into those deep blue eyes and remembered how she'd looked at him last night, as if everything she saw pleased her. And then she'd touched him, in ways he'd never been touched, with an eagerness he hadn't quite been able to believe was for him.

He'd ridden that high all night, for those hours letting himself believe, reveling in her touch and the feel of her and the incredible way she cried out his name when her body had clenched around his, sending him soaring to a height he'd never even known was possible.

Of course reality—his reality, the one he'd built himself growing up—hit in the morning. And so he wasn't surprised when he'd seen her at the ceremony, in fact that old, familiar voice in his head had been saying, "What did you expect?"

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But the pain of it shattered the protective shell he'd built over the years, and he'd run. Just as he'd done as that scared kid, he'd run. And she'd known it, been certain enough that it was the first thing she'd said. Why did you run?

"Is it really so hard for you to believe?" she asked softly, snapping him off of the old, worn track.

"Yes," he admitted, with a wry, self-directed chuckle.

"Well, get over it, Fox. Because I don't give up easily."

He looked at her then. Because he had to. "I kind of figured that out."

The smile she gave him then was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. She reached out and laid a gentle hand over his, rubbing slightly with her fingers, looking oddly as if she enjoyed the roughened texture of the skin there.

"Good," she whispered. "Because I didn't get the chance to tell you how much I love the feel, even the very thought of these wonderful, powerful hands, hands that do so much, touching me the way you do."

He nearly shuddered under the impact of those words. And in that moment he wanted nothing more than to kiss her, a good, long kiss that would bring back every moment of that spectacular night. And she was looking at him as if she wanted the same thing.

And so he did it.

Chapter Thirty-One

Tris was already smiling when she opened her eyes. It began because she didn't think she'd ever felt so comfortable as she did this morning. It was enough to turn her into a morning person. The peace, the quiet, the fresh air from the open window, were the perfect ambiance, as far as she was concerned. And this simple, secluded house in the Texas hills might just be the perfect place.

But the most perfect thing of all, of course, was the feel of Logan's arms around her, of his long, strong body pressed against her, of the luscious warmth of him. Not that it was cold, even at this early hour—this was Texas in June after all. But it was cool enough that she could savor that warmth...and everything else he'd given her last night. Lying naked under the sweep of stars, while his hands and mouth and body made her feel as if she were soaring among them.

Face it, he drove you starkly, utterly, completely mad last night.

That was another thing the seclusion of this place offered—there was no need to be...quiet.

She felt a different kind of heat rising, a self-conscious sort of flush as she remembered her own cries last night. And how every time one broke from her it seemed to make him wilder, which drove her further, until they were both on the edge of being out of control.

Or maybe over that edge.

She felt Logan's arms tighten around her, just slightly, as a sleepy sort of murmur came from him. "Mmm."

And then he went suddenly very still. Almost rigid.

Not as rigid as one part of him last night, though.

She nearly laughed embarrassedly at herself; she wasn't used to having thoughts like that. But after last night, everything had changed.

She had changed.

"I thought I'd dreamed it." The words he whispered in her ear took her breath away.

She shifted so that she could reach up to touch his face. "If this is a dream, I don't ever want to wake up."

He kissed her then, long and deep, a prelude to revisiting that wildness in each other they'd discovered last night.

It was much later, when a different kind of hunger drove them to scavenge what they could in his kitchen, that she paused and looked out the wide bank of windows that looked out over the Hill Country. The expanse was beautiful, and to her the peace and solitude of it soothed her soul.

"This place is...perfect," she whispered to herself. "Just perfect."

"You mean that?"

She'd sensed him coming up behind her, but didn't care if he heard her words. "I mean it completely. It's as close to my idea of paradise as anyplace I've ever been."

There was a second of silence, as if he were gathering himself. When he spoke she understood why, because he said, "Then stay."

She went very still. Then, slowly, she turned to look up at him. All beautiful six feet

of him. “Are you asking me to...move in?”

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“I thought we could at least...try.”

“Oh, we’ll do better than try, Logan Fox.” She almost purred it as she put her arms around his neck. “Thank you. For asking.”

He gave her the crooked smile she’d come to love. “Thank your brother.”

“Jackson?”

“He’s the one who told me he wished I would...help you build a new ship.”

It was so like her brother her eyes stung with tears for a moment. Then, smiling through it, she said, “Well, at least you don’t have to go ask for his approval, since he’s already given it.”

“Thank goodness,” he said, rather fervently.

To her the next week flew by. They spent it all together, alone, savoring the isolation that she knew would drive some mad. Logan postponed two routine appointments until the next week, just so they didn’t have to emerge from this wonderful cocoon they’d built together.

This new ship we’re getting ready to launch, Jackson.

She thought briefly of the other scars she’d found on him, besides the one that was always visible on his face—which was from a laceration when his mother had tossed him in that dumpster, he’d finally told her—and the one he’d said had been a hot iron

learning experience. Smaller, round marks that she knew all too well from one of her students who'd been pulled out of an abusive home. Cigarette burns. Longer, thin marks across his back, which told her he'd been whipped until he'd bled at some point.

She had kissed and stroked every one of them, and told him in every way she could think of, both physical and verbal, what they meant to her as proof of just how strong he was.

One morning she woke up to find him gone from what she was now thinking of as their bed, and for a moment she felt a qualm. But she remembered something he'd said yesterday, almost to himself, about going back out to the workshop to finish...something, she didn't know what since the words had faded away as he looked at her, and they'd ended up on the couch in the great room.

But he had been out there a few times, although not for long, and she'd thought it best to give him that time alone. She'd decided before she'd even moved in here that she was never going to assume there was a problem. She knew he needed time alone, just as she did, and she wasn't going to be offended if he took some of it. She was just glad that for him, as for her, simply being quiet in the same room together was enough. He'd told her that, just last night, that she soothed him as much as that quiet time did.

She got up, smiling at the memory. They were indeed building, and building well. She quickly dressed, ran a brush through her hair before she pulled it back in a tail at the back of her neck. She went for the coffee he'd put on earlier, and thought about going out to the workshop, wondering if it would be intruding.

Even as she thought it she heard steps on the porch. A moment later the front door swung open. Logan stopped when he spotted her up and at the kitchen counter. He had something in his hand, and it seemed almost like he was trying to hide it.

“Logan?”

She saw him take a deep breath, then he said, “It’s kind of silly, but I know you love them and...you said maybe I should try something like this myself...”

His voice trailed off, and at last he lifted the thing and held it out to her.

It was a bluebonnet. A Texas bluebonnet, forged in gleaming Texas steel yet as delicate as the real flower that exploded across the Hill Country every spring. Her very favorite flower. She stared at what he had done, more than a little stunned. The belt buckles had been a hint at what he could do, but this...this was genius.

The main stem was sturdy, the blossoms that burst all around it looked impossibly graceful, as if they would move in the slight whiff of air. The tiny petals curved perfectly, like the sun bonnets they were named for, and the overall shape was the same familiar cylinder with the burst of blossom at the top. He’d even managed to show the change in color pattern on each petal by a change in the texture of the metal.

“I thought you might...like it.”

Only when he finally spoke did she realize she’d been staring, motionless, in wonder. She reached out and took the stem, the weight of the piece reminding her that no matter how delicate and fragile this looked, it was not. And she let every bit of that wonder echo in her voice when she shifted her gaze to his face.

“You took my breath away, Logan. It’s...wonderful. It doesn’t even look possible, but there it is.”

“It...reminds me of you. Beautiful. Fragile-looking, but underneath as strong as steel.”

That easily, she melted inside yet again. And she spent the rest of the day telling him how much she loved it. And him.

And spent that night showing him.

It wasn't until she got a text on Thursday evening that reality intruded on their bliss, but in a good way. It was from Nic, and it was more along the lines of a demand than a request.

Meet us at the saloon tomorrow for the Friday night get-together. BOTH of you!

A moment later that was followed by a second text.

Do it or Jackson will be out there pounding on the door to check on you.

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“Well, I don’t want your brother mad at me,” Logan said when she showed him the messages.

She’d been half afraid he’d say no, that he wasn’t ready for this. Or maybe he didn’t realize this would be, in essence, going public. Not, she thought with a smile she had to hide, that she didn’t figure most of Last Stand already knew anyway. She not only didn’t care, she was delighted.

And as she was getting ready the next evening, she silently made one last acknowledgment.

I’m going to be fine, David. Better than fine. Thank you. For everything.

She took in a deep breath, glanced at herself in the mirror, then nodded firmly.

It was time to launch this new ship.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Logan stopped dead in his tracks when he saw that everybody who mattered in Tris’s life was there. Jackson and Nic of course, but also what looked like most of the Rafferty clan and at least half the Highwaters. Which meant almost everybody who mattered to him was there, too.

He stared at the Friday night gathering, which suddenly seemed different somehow than any other crowd who had been here in the saloon when he’d come in for one of these before. Or maybe it was that he was different. He certainly felt different. The

last week spent hidden away in his home had been nothing less than life-changing, for him anyway.

He let out a long breath, tried to suck one in to replace it. And then he felt Tris's hand wrapping around his, her fingers strong as she gave him a squeeze.

No one should have noticed that small movement, yet it seemed like everyone in the saloon did. And every last one of them seemed to be looking at him.

And smiling. Some downright grinning.

Including Jackson. "About time," he said as he came over and slung an arm around Logan's shoulders. "Come on, I'm buying the first round."

A voice came from behind the bar. "Fair warning, though, I'm a bit more generous with the good stuff than the regular bartender."

Logan looked that way, and he was pretty sure his jaw dropped. Because there was a Highwater behind the bar as usual, but it wasn't Slater. It was, of all people, Police Chief Shane Highwater. Who, in a way, had helped all this happen.

"Joey?" Tris asked, her voice sounding eager. And belatedly the probable reason for the staffing change hit him.

"Yep," Shane—because it was clear that's who he was tonight, not the chief—said, glancing at his watch. Still grinning, he went on. "About four hours ago. Mom and baby boy doing fine. New dad, not so much."

Everybody laughed. A slim, petite woman with hair almost that same autumn-leaves color as Tris's came up beside him, her smile almost as wide. "I seem to remember somebody else who pretty much lost his legendary cool in the maternity ward," Lily

Highwater said, slipping an arm around Shane while everyone laughed again.

“Guilty,” Shane confessed, pausing to give his wife a quick kiss. “I was a wreck.”

“Personally,” another unexpected voice came from behind him, and he turned sharply, “I want to know when someone’s going to add a girl to the population of this group.”

He knew he was probably gaping again but he couldn’t help it. Mrs. Valencia? The terror of Creekbend High School, the one teacher no one dared cross, here on a Friday night in the Last Stand Saloon?

“Working on it,” Jackson drawled, and Nic actually blushed.

To his shock the older woman reached out and patted his arm. “How’s one of my favorite students ever, Logan?”

If she hadn’t used his name he would have been looking around to see who she was talking to. And she was looking at him as if she knew exactly that. “I...was?”

“Of course you were. I knew your love of history was genuine, that your passion for it ran as deeply as my own. I wasn’t supposed to show favoritism, however, so I had to keep it under wraps. But now I’m retired, so I feel free.”

“Thank you,” he said, meaning it. “Ma’am,” he added, the memory of the fierceness of the woman in a classroom going through his mind.

“I wish I’d had the chance,” Tris said, respect clear in her voice.

Mrs. V, as her students had called her—only when they were certain she wasn’t around to hear it—smiled. “And I wish I’d had the chance to teach you.” She drew

back slightly, taking in both him and Tris. “But I’m very glad you two history lovers have found each other.”

“So am I...”

They’d both said it together, almost in unison, and that earned them the biggest smile he’d ever seen the usually stern woman give.

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“She’s changed,” he said as Mrs. V moved away.

“Or maybe you have,” Tris said.

He looked at her steadily. “I have. Thanks to you.”

“It was always there, Logan. Maybe I just helped with...the excavation.”

He couldn’t help it, he laughed. Loudly. Some heads turned, and he guessed it was probably because even though he knew most of the people here tonight, he doubted many of them had ever heard him really laugh. Because he hadn’t, really. Until Tris had come into his life.

Seeing Mrs. Valencia had reminded him of the scared, lonely kid he’d been. “I really have changed,” he murmured, almost to himself.

Tris moved away from the knot of people that had clustered next to them. He followed, automatically, inevitably. When they were off by themselves, she looked up at him steadily.

“You shouldn’t forget that kid you were, but he’s not you anymore,” she said quietly. Once more she’d read him like a book she knew well. But it didn’t unsettle him as it once had, it only made him feel...luckier.

Luckier than you deserve—

He cut off the old, instinctive reaction. Grimaced as he said, “I’m not sure I can

completely put him behind me.”

“He’s part of what made you the man you are. Just don’t let him run things anymore.”

He thought about those words as the night went on. As people came up to talk he thought he felt a change there, too. He’d always appreciated the respect the people of Last Stand gave him, but had always assumed it was for his work, not for himself. Because that kid he’d been had been sure he didn’t deserve it.

That kid was still there, jabbing him with ideas, telling him it was Tris who drew those people over to chat, not him....don’t let him run things anymore. Her words echoed in his mind, and he made himself accept the contact for what it really was, an assumption of friendship. It was a strange, new feeling for him, and for the first time he thought he just might be able to push the past far enough down that it would no longer pop up to taunt him.

Tris had done that. She was the one who’d make him think, made him stop, made him able to ignore that voice in his head that seemed only to want to tear him down.

While Mr. Herdmann, publisher of the local paper, The Defender, who to his shock had approached him about a profile their star human interest reporter—who also happened to be Mrs. Shane Highwater—wanted to do on him, paused to get a refill on his drink, Logan looked over to where she was talking to her brother and Nic. She seemed to feel his gaze because she turned her head, giving him a smile that had him wanting to bail on this gathering right now and go straight back to his place where they could be alone together. Another change. Before he’d have wanted to leave, but just to get out of the crowd.

Now he wanted to run to, not away.

And as they finally left, after Shane Highwater declared he was all poured out, he

found himself glancing at her as they drove, another realization crystallizing in his brain. Something he should have realized long ago. Something that just might silence that kid forever.

Tris wanted him. She was smart, clever, and quick. She was observant, perceptive, and sharp as a horseshoe nail.

And hotter than any forge.

So shouldn't the fact—undeniable after the last week—that she wanted him mean something? That he was worth it?

He was still marveling over the changes in his life that had begun that day at the Baylor ranch, when they had bumped into each other in the barn, when they got home and he paused to hang up his jacket. He turned around to find the room empty. Once, that might have been a jolt, but now he knew where to find her. Where she always went when they first arrived here, the deck looking out over the Hill Country.

He walked out there, and there she was, standing by the railing. They were approaching a full moon, and the light painted the rolling landscape with a cool, almost surreal glow.

He stopped behind her and slipped his arms around her. She let out a sigh that was so clearly happy it made his chest tighten. She leaned back against him, and again he had to process the revelation that for the first time in his life there wasn't one single thing he would change.

"It's nice to be home," she said.

"I'm glad you feel like that."

She twisted in his arms, although he didn't let go, didn't want to let go. She looked up at him. "I do. More than anyplace I've ever been. I feel as if this is what I've always wanted. I just never realized." She was facing him now, and slipped her arms around him, pressing herself against him as if she'd felt that same need to never let go. "Thank you. For sharing this with me."

"I'd share anything with you."

Her arms tightened. "I know." She let out a long, contented-sounding sigh. "That's why I feel like I'm home, after a long, hard road."

She did understand. More than anyone ever had. And the words he'd never expected to say broke from him.

"I love you, Tris."

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She tilted her head back and gave him an impish grin he never would have expected. “Would it be arrogant of me to say ‘I know’ again?”

He laughed, and with it the last bit of doubt, of that scared kid, took a nosedive. “Nope. Because you’re the most perspicacious person I’ve ever known.”

She laughed at the word, but then she simply looked at him for a long moment, her face painted by that same moonlight that was setting the hills aglow. “I love you, Logan Fox. I have for some time.”

Hearing it like that, from this woman, in this place he called home, with the hills rolling out beyond them in the moonlight, gave him a feeling he’d never had before. A feeling he knew he would fight to the death to keep. Just like those at the Alamo had.

“Then welcome home,” he whispered to her.

They stood looking out over the landscape, and Logan knew that it was true for them both, in different ways.

They were home at last.

The End