



The Texas Cowboy's Lady

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Description: Which shines brighter: Hollywood lights or the Texas stars?

Laurel Burkitt, who owns half of the mega-ranching empire known as the Aces High, shook the Texas dirt off her stilettos a long time ago. She's all about high fashion, sleek cars, and adding movie awards to her shelves. No dark-eyed, sexy, hard-driving, country-living cowboy is going to rope her into being his country darlin'...as long as her brain keeps control over the traitorous yearnings of her heart. Jaxson Hawkes, foreman of the Aces High, was born to the saddle and to being a cowboy all his days. So it took him a while to finally bare his soul to the spitfire he grew up adoring. He expected Laurel to choose between him and Texas and her dream of California gold. Her choice broke his heart. Now Laurel's back and her ideas of merging California with Texas aren't sitting too well with Jaxson. There's a showdown coming between them, and when the dust clears, will he send her packing on that shiny plane once and for all? Or will the lady claim the cowboy's heart for good?

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Prologue

The carpet wasn't as red as she'd thought it would be. Just one observation among many assailing Laurel's brain as she tried to remember to keep smiling, avoid tripping over her ball gown's skirt, and keep in the line of sight of the armed guards watching her every move—or rather the couple of million dollars' worth of emeralds adorning her neck, ears, fingers, you name it. And she couldn't muddle the name of the French designer who'd created the stunning white gown of heavy satin and lace with the emerald-green trim, bustier top, and corseted waist—yet another reason she was having issues taking a deep breath.

Writing the movie was the easy part compared to walking the most famous red carpet in the world.

“Smile, step, pose, turn, smile, and repeat. Sort of like a washing machine cycle. Think of it that way and the smile becomes easier. By the way, you look like a pro and an absolute goddess,” came the whisper in her ear from the tall, blonde man in a perfect black tie and tuxedo as they posed for those cameras.

“A goddess who might upchuck any moment. Or fall flat on my face if one more person steps on the train of this gown. Don't go too far away, I beg you.”

“You got this, babe. And don't forget, our top-secret game plan is now in play. CeeCee will be at your table at the dinner at the Governor's Ball later, right?”

“All is going as planned. It's number thirty-nine on my mental list of things to do to survive this night. Right before the one where you stop being my friend and I promise

not to write another word that puts me in this situation again. Much easier to watch this in my pajamas, at home on my sofa, with buttered popcorn and pizza.”

“Next year. And I’ll still be the friend who brings along the root beer you prefer over champagne. Now, go be marvelous in the interview they are calling you for this minute. See you later.”

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We see you. Wow, what a dress. Are those your own jewels?

The text was from Laurel’s sister, Sammi Jo, who, along with her husband, Beaudry, and daughter, Lacy, were home at the family ranch in Texas, watching the evening on television. Laurel smiled as she replied from her seat in the front row, right before the show was to begin.

Sorry, no. They are on loan. Too bad if you wanted to borrow them.

LOL... they would really look great with my jeans and boots smeared with cow manure. Lacy wants to borrow the dress for her fall dance, though.

Wow, my niece is old enough to go to a dance already? Slow things down. I am missing too much.

Then get on a plane and get home. You know where it is.

For a brief moment, Laurel’s fingers stilled over the keyboard of her cell phone. Sammi Jo’s words gave her pause for some strange reason. But she didn’t have time to dwell on it as the orchestra and lights indicated they were about to begin. She needed to sign off.

Must go. Thanks for watching and sending all those good thoughts all day.

We wouldn't miss this night. You got it. Granddad is boasting up there right now in Heaven and telling Grandmother that he had told her so all along. I knew you were meant to follow that dream of yours. Fingers crossed, and we are all waiting to hear your name called. BTW, you are missing a great party here.

Must go. Hugs to all.

“Hey, no time for frowns. Smile, babe. The camera is on you,” came Sean's reminder from his seat next to hers. All the while, her brain was going over what her sister had just said. It seemed quite a crowd had gathered at the Aces High main house. And just as quickly, a flash of a certain cowboy's face crashed into the thought.

Jaxson Hawkes. Would he be there too? Why not? He was in the family as the brother of Sammi Jo's husband, Beaudry. He'd be waiting to see her fall on her face. He was not a fan, not after their last parting. That, too, she pushed out of her mind. She needed to pretend to laugh at the jokes and watch as others took their turns on the stage. She would practice the smile she would hold for the camera as they announced her category and someone else's name was called. Then she could breathe, relax, maybe even take off the heels that were killing her feet. The bouffant skirt should hide them well enough.

But all of that plan went out the window as her name was announced for Best Original Screenplay and then again as Best Adapted Screenplay for a second movie, the one Sean had contracted her for. Her foot pain was forgotten, and a euphoria carried her forward as she received so many congratulatory hugs and posed for photos with half of the great names in Hollywood. She now knew what it was like to have been admitted into the close-knit club of the elite who possessed the same gold figurine. It cemented forever a place she had worked hard to earn and meant she was at the top of her game. When she caught her breath—whenever that might be—she

would figure out where one went after the top.

“Are you going to be able to eat anything? So many people keep interrupting your meal.” CeeCee grinned across the table at her, catching her in a moment where she actually reached for a bite from her salad. Laurel smiled as she took another quick bite. “It’s crazy, isn’t it? I keep thinking I’m going to wake up in a moment and these two fellows will disappear.” She nodded at the gold statuettes close beside her plate, her hand still fingering the engraving of her name on each.

“They are very real, and you certainly worked hard enough for them. You can name your own ticket in this town. I’m in awe. And also taking notes. You went after your dream, and I want to do the same.”

CeeCee—such a beautiful person she had met by chance on the first day she arrived in LA. CeeCee was a transplant from New Mexico—“a neighbor” was how they termed it in Texas. CeeCee worked in a very well-known event planning business. Leaders and celebrities from all walks of life were their clients. But CeeCee’s real passion was weddings, and as she had seen some of the drawings and notes, Laurel knew her friend had something special to offer. That’s why Laurel had made plans to provide start-up funds as a silent partner.

Then along came Sean with his own idea to add to that plan.

“You know people out here are like lemmings—they follow each other blindly. One wedding involving a bride and groom from the rarified A list, and she’d have that magic key to the golden doorway.”

And that was the day Sean showed another side of himself to Laurel. He could be a very serious man. There was a definite heart beating inside that chest, and he was madly in love with CeeCee, since he had fallen at first sight. He had an idea. And she was needed to play a part.

Sean had been ready to propose and announce his good fortune to the world for several months. But CeeCee was more cautious and far more private. She had been more reticent and was hesitant to discuss a future for the two of them. It was apparent how much she loved Sean, but she had reasons to be careful that were hard for her to lay to rest. Her life had been far different from Sean's. She came from a small town beset with drug issues, closed businesses, and very little hope for anyone who had dreams of bettering their life. There had never been any support for her getting away to a better life, to going after such mercurial dreams. But she had fought her way out and was slowly gaining her foothold on the road where her dreams could grow. However, CeeCee was adamant that her life not become the fodder for gossip columns and tabloids. The limelight was not for her. And that was the obstacle Sean—with Laurel's help—was intent on surmounting.

Tonight, Laurel and Sean were going to pitch CeeCee an idea. She would be offered a wedding to plan... the most perfect one she could imagine. In fact, she was to imagine it was to be her dream day. Sean would offer them a ride home and, after dropping Laurel first, he had an ideal place along the coast road where he would get down on one knee beneath the full moon. He wanted the proposal to be perfect for her. And he would use his best persuasive tactics to get CeeCee to go along with the wedding planning, while he and Laurel would serve as the decoy couple. Paparazzi could come after them, not her. And they also had another plan to draw attention even further away from the real wedding plans, but that would be announced later.

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So, Laurel did her best to keep a straight face when feigning yawns. Perhaps another Oscar performance? She clutched two, so a third might be pushing it as she waved them goodbye and shut the front door of her Malibu condo. She had a pretty good idea that CeeCee would not be coming home that evening. Lucky lady.

Sammi Jo had called earlier, and Laurel heard all the yells of congratulations and partying still going strong. Too bad she wasn't there. Instead, she was now in a quiet condo looking out over an ocean, the sound of the waves crashing along the shore breaking the stillness of the early morning hour. She was alone with her two little gold men staring at her from the shelf she had placed them on. It wasn't the first time she had felt alone that evening. Even in the huge auditorium with the famous names seated around her, there was still something most of them had that she didn't. There was someone seated next to them, someone whose hand they could reach for to gain a confident squeeze of assurance, someone who they would share a heartfelt kiss of elation with if called to the stage, or someone to share a look of comfort with after the cameras moved on. Laurel knew she shouldn't be selfish. She had achieved the highest level of acceptance in Hollywood... the world over included. Yet, there was something missing.

She had only herself. Sean had given her the hug of congratulations and that was good. But it wasn't the same. His heart belonged elsewhere. And her heart... in the darkness of the house, she allowed the truth to join her. Her heart was far, far away, where it had remained the whole time after she had left her Texas roots. She could admit that. It wasn't going to be a hindrance in her eyes or show a lack of determination on her part. Because she had won out. But a cowboy had once handed her his heart, much the same as she suspected Sean was doing at that moment with CeeCee. Only their story would have a far happier ending.

How different the evening might have been if it had been Jaxson's hand in hers, his quiet confidence bolstering hers, and his kiss making the evening perfect. She stuffed the memories back behind that door once more and hid the key. Just another dream to file away.

You did it once before and look at you now. Where did that thought come from? There's another dream, so go for it. What's stopping you?

"Another dream, yes. And now, what would stop us? If not now, then when?" The words were spoken aloud so that made them so... or so she had been taught by her grandmother. A new fire began within her with that simple thought she voiced into the silent rooms. Never stop to rest when you have a goal within sight. That was purely her grandfather, Sam. She had them both inside her. And she was a Texan, born and bred.

Texas was calling. Laurel Burkitt was going home.

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"That one isn't made for this land. Her heart has to want to be here. Right now, hers is off seeking something she can't find on the Aces High. So don't go breaking yours over it. Best to let her go and get on with your living."

How many times over the last eighteen years had Samuel Burkitt's sage words echoed through Jaxson Hawkes's memory? A dozen? That would be the number of times Jaxson had sat on his horse or in his truck and watched the sleek Gulfstream, with the brand of the Aces High Ranch emboldened on its gleaming white tail, lifting, leaving the Texas dirt behind as it soared high headed toward the western sky... toward the blue waters of the Pacific. Toward the land of mansions and fast cars and movie stars on every street corner. The golden place where Laurel Burkitt, granddaughter of Samuel and Sarah, believed her destiny had waited to be claimed.

The number of times his heart had been ripped apart.

And each time, Jaxson would be left to get over the one woman who had ever laid claim to any part of his heart. The only one who wanted no part of him, neither his heart nor his way of life. His problem? No real lady wanted the life he could offer. He had been born a cowboy. He'd worked his whole life as a cowboy. And chances were in his favor to die a cowboy.

But it wouldn't be from unrequited love. He had watched that plane, which sat waiting even then for the next call from California, to take off for the last time, leaving him feeling like there was a huge hole in his chest that nothing could fill. It made him irritable, according to his brother, Beaudry, and every other human who dared to come near him for weeks after her inevitable departures.

And he was tired. Tired of the silent looks of pity from his family members and from the people in Burkitt, Texas, who enjoyed the gossip of it all each time that plane brought the woman back for a "visit" and then kicked into high gear when that plane took her away again.

Well, his brother, Beaudry, had married Laurel's sister, Sammi Jo. The wedding had come and gone. Samuel Burkitt had departed the earth, leaving only a memory of his sage words behind in Jaxson's mind. Life was supposed to settle down and go on. And darned if he would waste one more moment on the woman who clearly was enjoying her success and life out west. Her screenwriting had earned her a few really big awards, the last being two all-coveted Oscars. So, Jaxson knew then that the future was pretty well mapped out and his fate had been sealed. He had watched her stand there on the stage, on the television, with two gold statuettes grasped in her hands and the look of triumph in her eyes. She had conquered the mountain.

It did no good to sit on his horse and gaze on an empty runway, waiting for a jet to return and deposit the Hollywood lady once again into their lives... for a brief

interlude. It was time to settle down, take the blinders off his eyes, sweep out the corners of his heart. How many times could a heart be trampled on and keep going?

It wasn't like he hadn't tried. Three years ago, when Laurel had returned home for Samuel's funeral, Jaxson had found the courage to speak up, to put his heart at her feet. And what had she done? She had slowly shaken her head, a look between pity and sorrow cast upon him. She had slowly handed over the suitcase in her hand at the bottom of the plane's steps.

"Jax, you do have an odd sense of timing. I have a dream in California that has finally become my reality. Being a foreman's wife on a ranch with its day-in and day-out monotony is my sister's idea of a dream, but it'd be a nightmare to me. Some country girl around here would die and go to Heaven if you looked in her direction, and she'd be the woman you deserve. But it just can't be me.

"But you could come west with me. Have you ever thought about that? Just get on the plane and we can fly away from here. There's a whole world out there besides Texas."

He could only offer her silence. Then she shook her head. "You couldn't leave here anymore than I could stay. You have your world and I have mine. They're just too far apart." Then she had raised on tiptoe and presented the coup de grace—a bestowed kiss on the cheek. And she was gone.

That was the last time he watched the plane leave. He would never do that again. Work was his life. And Jaxson had work to do. And a large part of that involved getting on with his job as foreman of the Aces High and finding his own life and happy-ever-after.

That thought made him shake his head. His sights might be set a tad bit high there. He'd start with getting a haircut. That often gave a guy a new perspective, right? And

then... well, he didn't know what would come next. But whatever it was, it wouldn't involve any more thoughts of Laurel Burkitt and the fancy lady life she craved.

Best to let her go. Old Samuel's words rang true again in his mind, and Jaxson would do just that.

Chapter One

"So, all of that land below us right now—that's where you came from?" The man kept his fascinated gaze on the ground outside the sleek jet's window.

A small bit of laughter prefaced Laurel Burkitt's response. She shifted deeper into her sumptuous, supple cream leather seat and took her gaze off the page of the fashion magazine in her lap. "Not literally, but yes, in a roundabout way. That land and a whole lot more of it that we've been flying over for the better part of a half hour now became home for me and my sister when our parents died when we were almost six. Our grandparents took us in, and the Aces High Ranch became the place we grew up. The place we ultimately inherited. The home my sister poured her heart and soul into preserving for us and those who live and work on it now and in the future."

"A modern-day empire! My God, there are horses running below us. I've never seen so many in one place! There must be a hundred or more. It's like I'm watching a scene from National Geographic or something. Only this is in living color in front of me. Truly unbelievable what I am learning about you now."

"Well, there are a lot more horses just like those in other areas of the ranch, along with cattle too. And this empire, to use your wording, has been around for a couple hundred years now, but it isn't mine any longer. At least not for the last couple of years, since my sister bought me out, and that just left me with about 150,000 acres still to my name."

Her companion finally tore his gaze away from the window and fixed it upon her. “I had heard rumors around town that you owned a good chunk of Texas, but I never really thought about what it meant in actuality. My fiancée is a real live Texas gazillionairess, with just 150,000 acres. Fancy that!”

“Fancy that, indeed,” she parroted him in return. “Just keep in mind that I agreed with this fiancée charade of yours to give the real woman of your dreams the private nuptials she wants and deserves. And to ask my sister for any objections she might have for our joint business venture on my share of the Aces High. I am still unsure we’ll fool anyone. But since I do have two Oscars and you have one, I feel we might have a better than fifty-fifty chance of pulling all of this off.”

“You seem to take great pleasure in bringing up the discrepancy in our Oscar equality. I do believe that my directing award beats out your two screenwriting ones. At the very least, we are equal partners in crime. Okay, let’s go over one more time the cast of characters I’m about to win over with my deft charm.”

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Laurel shook her head, laying aside the magazine on the table beside her. “You have three to lock into your brain. My sister, the person who stepped out of our grandmother’s very huge shadow and into the spotlight of being the matriarch of all you survey below us—Samantha Josephine Burkitt Hawkes. But don’t call her that if you want to stay on her good side. Everyone calls her Sammi Jo. She is married to Beaudry Hawkes, my brother-in-law, who is fairly amazing and perfect for her. If you could clone him and cast him in one of your films as the new John Wayne, you’d be set for another Oscar.

“Beaudry had a little girl when they married, Lacy, who will have her twelfth birthday in another month. But she is smart as a whip and is more like twelve going on twenty. There you have the main cast of characters.”

“I thought I’ve heard you mention that your brother-in-law’s brother works on the ranch too. He sounded like he might be important. What’s his story?”

“He’s the main foreman. There are four sections of the ranch—north, south, east, and west. Also referred to as camps. Each of those has a camp boss, and they all report to the main foreman. That’s how our grandfather set it up. You won’t see him much. He is far too busy for the likes of us.”

“Does he have a name? In case I happen to trip over him one day in the barn or something?”

Laurel gave another laugh. “The idea of you tripping over anything remotely close to a barn is pretty funny. Just remember to put your boots on that we bought you right before we left the city and put away your Gucci loafers. They won’t react well to

being covered in horse manure, which is what you would be likely to trip over if you find the barn.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Miss Smarty-Pants. And that interests me.”

Laurel gave him one of her most sincere smiles. Sean Collins was often too shrewd for his own good. And she certainly didn’t need him to become too interested in someone like the foreman in question. Play it cool.

“Jaxson Hawkes. He is Beaudry’s older brother. There was a third brother, a step brother also, but he disappeared when his plane went down in the Middle East a dozen or more years ago. He came along, as I understand it, after their mother divorced Beaudry and Jaxson’s father and remarried. I never met him—none of us have. And there you have it. Not a lot to remember.” She stood. “I’m going back to the bedroom and freshen up. We should be landing in about fifteen minutes or so. Remember what I said about those shoes.” She tossed the last bit as she disappeared toward the rear compartment of the Gulf Stream. Once the door closed behind her, she leaned her back against it for a moment.

A slow exhaling of air followed as she replayed her performance before Sean. She felt she had thrown Sean off any reason to be unduly concerned over Jaxson Hawkes. Then, in the next second, she realized she was the one being unduly concerned. Laurel pushed away from the door and crossed to the closet, where the outfit hung, losing any wrinkles it might have attracted in the carry-on bag a few hours earlier.

The cream jacket was cut stylishly longer in the back, the matching slacks were slimmer and showed a length of leg by their designer cut, and the bright magenta color of the silk blouse with its high neck matched the too-expensive boots that were clearly a nod to her Texas roots blended with her West Coast chic. Her strawberry-blonde hair with its blonder highlights was feathered to accentuate her high cheeks and fell to just below her chin level. Sideswept bangs were cut to fall in wisps when

she wanted to make her eyes appear to play hide-and-seek with someone or to shield her true thoughts from prying eyes. She would be presenting a new look as she stepped back on Texas soil. What would they think?

Laurel had realized her dream of making a name for herself in Hollywood, and now she was about to embark on one of the wildest plans anyone might dare: bringing Hollywood to the wide-open spaces of Texas and investing a few of those gazillion dollars Sean had alluded to earlier. If she succeeded, she would be hailed as a visionary filmmaker. If she failed... well, at least there would be a few thousand acres to get lost in. But she didn't plan to fail. She just needed people to believe in the fact she was serious about coming back—back to the Aces High, back to Texas, back to a cowboy who had probably written her off. And that would be good, right? No complications with any cowboy who once might have had a crush on her. A cowboy whom she might have given up her dream for, once upon a long time ago. But they were both past such things now. Life had moved on. They had as well...right?

She caught her reflection in the mirror. No cowboy was going to be allowed to derail or sidetrack these plans—certainly not one with his dark-eyed gaze that always could pierce right through her barriers and read her soul. But the last time they were together, she had gotten her point across, purposely trying to pierce her way into his heart, to shake loose from the pull he was having on her own feelings. It had taken every ounce of willpower to turn away from the hurt in those eyes and not look back. It had been worse because she had asked him to come with her instead. And he had remained. Neither of them was prepared to leave their dreams. So, she had steeled herself, hands gripping the arms of the seat she had belted herself into once aboard the plane. She was not returning to the ranch for a very long time.

That's what she had told herself almost three years ago. But things happened and life decided to turn her around and put Texas in her sights again. The question was, would Jaxson still be there waiting as he had each time before? The real question was much harder—what would she feel if he wasn't?

Chapter Two

The large grandfatherclock in the corner of the office counted out the hours four times, and then the chime sounded. The man seated behind the desk, Beaudry looked up, first at the face of the clock, and then across the desk at Jaxson, whose gaze slid over the figures on the spreadsheet in front of him as if he had all the time in the world.

Beaudry put down his pen. “Is there weather between here and Denver? The plane run into it?”

Jaxson looked up at his brother. “Not that I know of. Why?”

“You’re still here. Weren’t you supposed to drive Sammi Jo and Lacy to the airstrip to meet Laurel’s plane at four?”

“Sammi Jo and Lacy are at the airstrip. As far as I know, the plane is on time or Ben would have let me know.”

“Ben? Did he go to meet the plane? Why aren’t you there? This paperwork could have waited.” Beaudry eyed his brother more closely.

“Last I looked, there are at least a half dozen ranch hands within walking distance of this house and the garages. Any one of them is quite capable of driving the two miles to the airstrip and picking up guests. They’ve done it plenty of times.”

“Picking up guests, yes. But this isn’t just a guest. This is Laurel. Laurel, who is coming home after almost three years. You always pick her up. What gives?”

“Nothing gives. We have reports to finish up, and Ben is quite capable of picking up luggage and guests—more precisely, Laurel and this guest of hers, her fiancé. Sammi

Jo and Lacy are more than enough to perform welcoming duties.”

Beaudry shook his head. “What a load of BS. It’s because Laurel has come back, but she isn’t alone this time. She finally went and did it. You know it was inevitable.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking this, but what was inevitable in your way of thinking?”

“That one day she would come back home, and she would bring someone to meet the family. Someone who isn’t you. And then you would have to admit that you probably made a huge mistake along the way by not being a lot more open and letting her know how you felt. You and your stubbornness blew it, and you don’t like it one little bit. So, you think that by sitting here, pretending to be so interested in equipment inventories, that no one will notice you blew it.”

Jaxson shook his head and met his brother’s gaze. “You know your mind is a never-ending source of amazement to me. How it functions is just mind-boggling. I hate to tell you, but you are wrong. I didn’t blow anything. I told the lady how I felt about her at that airstrip when she left last time. She gave me a smile of pure pity and told me that both this life and I weren’t for her. Then she left. Pardon me, but I didn’t blow anything. However, I seem to be wasting time now. Because I do have dinner plans with a beautiful lady named Arabella.” Jaxson stood, drew his hat down on his head, and left the papers lying in front of his brother. “You have yourself a good dinner tonight. I know I plan to do just that.”

Jaxson made it outside the house and down the steps. And then he heard the sound of a vehicle’s engine that he recognized. Ben had collected the guests and made record time getting back to the ranch house. The darn plane must have been early. It wasn’t like he could ignore it and just get in his own truck and pull away. Sammi Jo and Lacy would know something was wrong. And it could appear to Laurel and her guest that maybe he wasn’t man enough to stand his ground and be the bigger person. That

maybe she still had power over him, had him wrapped around her little finger. The engine stopped and doors opened. There was nothing for it but to place a smile on his face and turn to greet the group. The usual dark-lensed glasses were in place on his face.

And, of course, the first person that Jaxson saw was her. How could he help but see her? She stood out in all of her Hollywood glitter and polish. And the divide between a lady and a cowboy just moved into the realm of Grand Canyon proportions. And then there was the tall drink of water standing beside her, her arm drawn through his as if they were posing for some silly fashion magazine photo spread.

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Jaxson eyed the man. The designer jeans under the casual expensiveness of a lightweight jacket of some gray cloth open to reveal a cream shirt. Jaxson made a slow inspection, from the perfectly swept-back dark hair caught into some leather knot at the back of his head and the trimmed bit of goatee on his chin to the tip of his shiny brown lizard boots that screamed of money and very little dirt. He kept the urge to laugh outright under control. So, this was the man Laurel had chosen for herself?

This should be fun. He stopped himself from leaning over and depositing a loogy on those stupid boots. With any luck, this would be a very short visit.

Sammi Jo stepped into the breach between the two sides of the divide. She flashed her smile at her brother-in-law. It was clearly backed up by the spark he was well acquainted with in her eyes leveled on him. “And here is my favorite brother-in-law, Jaxson Hawkes. You’ll see him around all over the place as he is the oil that makes all of this look and run easier than it is and allows many to appear smarter than we think.” The easy laughs cracked the thin layer of ice. She followed up with a wink in his direction and then made a pointed look at her sister.

“Seems my sister has left her manners somewhere over New Mexico on the way here. So let me introduce you, Jaxson, to Sean Collins, our Laurel’s freshly minted fiancé from California. I know you’ll take the time to make him welcome during his stay here and show him some of the areas that make the Aces High so special.”

Jaxson nodded toward the man. “I’d shake hands, but I’ve been castrating some cattle this morning among other things we do here on a daily basis.”

A well-manicured hand shot up to match the shaking head. “That is perfectly

understandable. I look forward to seeing the ranch, but do not plan to be a bother—just an observer.”

Jaxson just gave another nod and a smile to Sammi, pushing the stained crown of his straw cowboy hat down tighter on his head. “And now I do have some things to ‘oil,’ as our boss lady said, so excuse me.” He opened the door of the black double-cabbed truck beside him and was inside in one smooth move. Sammi Jo stepped into the void again, leaning toward the open window.

“Dinner will be at seven. On the patio.”

“My apologies,” Jaxson responded with a wider smile in her direction, but in a voice all could hear. “I’ve already told Beaudry I’ve dinner plans tonight with a friend in Abilene. I’ll have to take a rain check. If you need anything tonight, Ben has the watch. I should be back before sunup. Have fun.” The truck’s engine roared to life, and he made his escape.

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“Interesting scene,” Sean murmured for Laurel’s ears only. “Fascinating undercurrents. My director’s nose smells something there.”

“That’s fresh cattle poop coming from the pens around the hill from us.” Laurel bit out the sarcastic response under her breath. They fell into step just behind Sammi Jo, and Lacy ran ahead to open the massive wooden door at the top of the wide steps.

“You’ve got your usual suite of rooms, Laurel, and Carmella also added the suite next to yours. I wasn’t sure how much space you wanted, so you have plenty to choose from.” She tossed that bit over her shoulder as they stepped into the cooler interior with the winding staircase to the upper regions.

The look on Sean's face was not unexpected. Laurel smiled. They were used to the shock and awe greeting from first-time guests crossing the threshold as they tried to find the words for what they'd suddenly stepped into. "I know you had shown me a couple of photos before we left to come here, but this... this is..."

"It's home," Laurel finally spoke up, stepping over to share a hug with her sister. They smiled in unison at Sean. "It takes a while for most to get used to it. It's big. It's grand in the old ways of the cattle barons, and yet I see my sister has taken some steps to modernize it, also, and that is as it should be. Each generation has left their imprint on it for good and bad. But don't let it overwhelm you. And don't worry, we'll leave a trail of breadcrumbs for you to follow in case you get lost." They laughed then.

"Why am I not so sure that is a joke?" Sean shook his head at them, smiling at the pair. "Could you leave extra in case I get truly lost and might need some food along the way?"

Sammi Jo smiled at her daughter. "Lacy, can you show Mr. Collins the way upstairs to the suites?" To Sean, she said, "And I'll send my sister up in just a few minutes."

"How about I show him upstairs and get to meet him?" The voice belonged to Beaudry, who had come from another doorway set in an alcove behind the stairs.

He came over and hugged Laurel. "It's about time you made an appearance back here. Thought you might have lost your sense of direction and where home was located."

"And there it is, the first of many jabs about Texas and home and so forth. I warned you, Sean, it would be my sister, but now it seems it might be a tag-team effort from the pair of them."

“I totally understand that. I get the same treatment from my mother whenever I find New York City is still on the same map as California.” They all laughed, and Beaudry shook the man’s hand.

“I see you haven’t been castrating anything today,” Sean shared.

Beaudry paused with a questionable set of his head. Laurel laughed. “It seems your foreman and brother couldn’t shake hands, his excuse being he had spent the morning castrating cattle.”

Beaudry slowly nodded. “I see. Yes, he is a busy man.”

“Busy indeed. Seems he is already booked for dinner too. In Abilene.”

“Abilene?” Beaudry responded. “That must be where his Arabella is from. He did mention they had a dinner date tonight. But let’s don’t stand here in the hallway—let’s get everyone settled in.” He took the two suitcases that Ben had set in the hallway on their arrival and led the way ahead of Sean, who had his carry-on bag and Laurel’s.

Sammi Jo pulled Laurel along in her wake into a smaller sitting room off the main hall. Lacy headed toward the kitchen at the back of the main floor, leaving them alone.

“Okay, give me the scoop on this fiancé of yours.” Sammi Jo wasted little time, settling hips against the edge of her desk, folding her arms, waiting for the information.

“I told you most of it already on the phone. We met at one of those awards luncheons, then again for drinks a couple of days later. He became almost a mentor to me, helping me avoid mistakes and keeping my head above water and away from the

sharks in the deep end. Sean opened doors I would still be hammering on if he hadn't come to my aid. He and CeeCee, who is our wedding planner and will be here in a few days, became surrogate family. She is a sweetheart, and I know you will love her."

"There seems to be a lot left out, like what is he like? Where is he from? How long did it take to fall for him?"

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“Okay, now I feel like we need to have our pajamas on, a tub of strawberry ice cream and two spoons, and having applied facial masks while we gossip about boys. Aren’t we a bit old for that scenario?”

“Hmmm, interesting.” Sammi Jo eyed her sister. “Since this is the first time my sister has dared to bring home a live fiancé, I guess I just expected a bit more gushing. Guess things are really laid back in Tinseltown.”

Laurel shook her head. “Gushing? When have you known me to be a gushing type of gal? That sounds like you have me confused with all those oil wells we flew over. They were gushing their guts out.”

Sammi Jo threw back her head and laughed outright. “Now, who is the confused one? They have already gushed, been capped, and now are pumping their little hearts out for the oil that is keeping this all afloat. But look at you... what a change. And that hairdo—now that is quite a change. You always loved having long locks. Guess your fiancé prefers this new style?”

“I wouldn’t know. I thought I’d give it a try. So much easier to handle and all. If I don’t like it, it’ll be grown out soon enough. You look like the glowing bride I left, but surely the honeymoon is over by now?”

“I’d say the honeymoon is still going quite strong.”

Laurel grinned. “You are blushing too. I won’t dare ask for particulars. I’d just be jealous.” Then there was silence.

Sammi Jo's gaze homed in on the slip, like a mouse to a bit of cheese, before the cat could strike. "Jealous? When you have a fiancé who surely must make you blush sometimes? Or is that something Hollywood males don't do either?" She didn't wait for her sister's response.

"You and Jaxson didn't speak to each other. You both were definitely ignoring the other. What's that about?"

"We nodded. Since when should we be expected to gush over each other? And maybe he was too occupied with thoughts of Miss Abilene and all. You didn't mention he was seeing anyone in your emails."

"And that does seem to interest you. Interesting. Hope your fiancé is not the jealous type. But then, you certainly moved on, so why should you be surprised when Jaxson does the same? It's time he had the home he deserves and the wife and kids. You'll see how good he is with Lacy... she follows him like a shadow. I, for one, hope he is about to settle down. We'll throw them a great party. You still love a good party, don't you?"

"I think it's time I stop ignoring my fiancé upstairs. I need a long soak in the tub before dinner. And then maybe you and I can sit down and catch up on some things."

"Well, if it is business things, those will wait until morning. Tonight, we relax and enjoy some of Freddy's great cooking. He has been preparing this dinner and the recipes all week. All your favorite things. So even if you lost your love for home cooking in California, too, do try and pretend for his sake?"

Laurel paused with her hand on the doorknob and shot her a nod. "Of course, I will lavish the praise. I can see I'll need to step up my morning runs in order to fight the pounds facing me while I'm here. See you at dinner."

She found her living area and bedroom empty when she entered. She made her way across and through the dressing area off her walk-in closet, where the door was open in front of her. She stepped in and found Sean busy unpacking his suitcase.

His footfalls were muted on the carpet, and she smiled. “I see the new boots lasted until the door closed behind Beaudry. Socks comfy?”

She moved over to the windows to push the drapes back and let the wide vista beyond share its light into the room.

“My God. My feet may be deformed after all of this. People actually walk in those things?”

“Yes, they do. In fact, there is nothing better than a pair of boots, properly broken in, of course. I have a few pair that I still enjoy wearing now and then. Are you going to be comfy here?”

“Yes. This is comparable to a five-star experience in a high-end hotel. I never expected to find Egyptian-cotton sheets and thick carpeting. The bathroom is a spa in itself. I just need a masseuse and I might never leave.”

“Well, if you want one of those, we do have one who will come out to the ranch. Just say the word. Carmella will make it happen.” Laurel turned her attention to the view. She had no idea how much she had missed so many things. The smells, the cool tiles of the patio, and the shadows of the tall pecan and oak trees that bordered the drive and walkways. Entering her bedroom, it was as if she had only just left that morning and not years before. The strangeness she had expected upon her arrival had not materialized. Except... except for one thing.

Her gaze moved beyond the drive outside the window and toward the first sequence of barns at the bottom of the small rise of hill. That would be the foreman’s

office—the offices for the horse operations and the cattle would be housed in another area. And that would be where Jaxson Hawkes ruled his world from. When he was there. Most of the time, he would do his work from the back of his horse for hours at a time or inside his big black truck. A sedentary desk was not meant for him.

And out of habit, she noted that the truck sat in its usual parking space beside a couple of others. She saw several stock trailers were pulling into the barns or vice versa. Ranchers were either bringing in horses for training or buying them or both. Jaxson Hawkes would be in his element.

She felt that unfamiliar shaft of disappointment again. The only thing that had changed in her homecoming from all the other times... was him. He had always been present when she stepped through the doorway of the plane and let her gaze land on him, usually standing silently beside his truck, waiting for her to make the final step. Then he would be there to take the luggage from the flight attendant and place inside the vehicle, hold her door for her, and they would set off for the drive to the main house. It was a relatively short couple of miles, but he always managed it slower than most. They would have small talk. And then there would be that silence that always said more than their talking had.

Only today, he hadn't been there for her to catch the first glimpse of a welcome home from. Another person loaded their luggage. She made small talk with her sister and niece and Sean. As she stood outside the vehicle at the house, then he had been there. Only they had not spoken. A very wide gulf had formed between them, unseen but felt. And there had been a hollow pain between her ribs. It shocked her into stillness.

All she wanted to do was tell Sean to get back on the plane. He was the jarring note in the whole moment. But then, that would have been wrong as well. Jaxson was different. Something had changed in him or around him or because of him. But she didn't like it. And then it hit her full force. There was this mystery woman in Abilene. He was having dinner with her and not with them and the family. And in the past, that

never would have happened.

In the past.

“You know you’re wrong, right?” Sean’s voice jarred her back into the room, away from the barns and away from Jaxson. She turned toward him. He stood watching her, hands on hips, his head tilted in the manner when he was giving something his deepest attention.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You told me that I would find your brother-in-law, Beaudry, to be the perfect leading man for a movie about these rough-and-tumble cowboys. And you were wrong. Beaudry is quite photogenic; I would grant you. However, my cinematic eye tells me that Jaxson is the one that a camera would eat up and make females gush in more ways than one, my friend. I am really surprised that you haven’t figured that one out for yourself.”

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Then he smiled that smile that reminded her of a Cheshire cat about to play the final card to win it all. “But you know all of that. Because I would say that Miss Laurel Burkitt has known this secret most of her life. And if I were a real fiancé, I would have had to challenge that cowboy to a duel or some such, because there was a red-hot pulse between the two of you that no fool would dare have crossed for fear of being vaporized.”

“And that is crazy. Cowboys don’t duel. And there is nothing between Jaxson and me. You heard that for yourself. He’s seeing someone. So put away your movie director mind and keep your romantic meanderings in gear to keep up this pretense for the sake of your lady love and the wedding surprise.” She left her spot at the window and any thoughts associated with a dark-eyed cowboy far past the distant hills. She had two reasons to have come home to Texas, and neither involved Jaxson Hawkes.

Chapter Three

“Seriously? This is the great place to have coffee and a quiet chat?” Laurel watched her sister unpack a thermos and a plastic container from one of her saddlebags. From the other, Sammi Jo took a couple of plastic mugs and napkins. Her gaze then moved over the wide landscape around the hilltop locale. Their horses had been tethered to a low branch of the sprawling oak tree that stood beside the familiar fallen log that was apparently going to serve as their table and seating for two.

“This is certainly strolling down memory lane.” Laurel hoped the spot would be as conducive to a good conversation as the last time. And she couldn’t help but feel the pull as she surveyed the expanse of land before them that was the lifeblood of her

family and even herself.

“Yes, you brought me here to drop the bombshell about grandmother selling the ranch out from under us. That was quite memorable.” Sammi Jo handed a cup of hot coffee she’d poured, along with two sweeteners and a spoon, over to her sister.

“And yet it all turned out for the best. Look what you got. Not just the ranch you fought for, but a fantastic husband and daughter. You don’t look like you could be any happier or any more content in your life. And from what I have seen in just the short time here and reading the reports you diligently have sent me each month; I have to say that you have succeeded and then some in keeping the Aces High a viable ranching empire—with your debt paid off early to boot. Way to go, little sis. You are more a chip off the Burkitt block than anyone would have guessed. I am proud of you.” Laurel took a sip of coffee to push down the surprising knot that formed in her throat at the sudden mixture of happiness and envy. Which she then set aside quickly. She had achieved her own goals too.

“Well,”—Sammi Jo nodded—“if I seem to be happy and contented, it is because I do have my dream of the ranch, an amazing man who loves me as much as I do him, a beautiful little girl who calls me Mom, and soon to have another one to add to the list of blessings.” She took a sip from her water bottle.

Laurel stilled. Had her brain heard right? She locked her gaze on her sister straddling the log in front of her. There was a small twitch of a grin. Laurel was on her feet, coffee cup left to precariously balance on the log, literally jumping for joy. Her arms practically pulled Sammi Jo off her perch to join in a huge hug. Her version of a happy dance ensued. There was laughter and tears and then more hugs.

“I’m going to be an aunt again? You’re having a baby? My little sister is having a baby? Really?!”

“I am nodding my answer because you’re squeezing so tight, I can’t breathe.”

Laurel loosened her grip and was immediately apologetic. “Sit down! Why are you standing? Should we have come out here on that bumpy road?”

“Calm down, Beaudry Number Three. Seems I need to remind you, like the others, that women have babies all the time. I won’t break.”

“Number Three? And women might have them all the time, but not my sister. And I’m going to be an aunt again. How long? We must have time to plan a fabulous shower and the nursery, and we can do a reveal and...”

“Slow down. We have six months to go. I wanted to get past the first trimester before telling the family. I told Beaudry a month ago. Then he let it slip one day to Jaxson, who has kept the secret better than any of us. And this afternoon, we are going on a picnic and telling Lacy. I hope she’ll be happy too.”

“Of course, she will. She’ll be the best big sister in the world.”

“Stop crying.” Sammi Jo handed her a paper napkin. “I thought you were the super-happy energized aunt?”

“Of course, I’m happy.” Laurel tried to not make a mess of her makeup. “People cry when happy too.”

“Well, you need to get a move on. I want our babies to grow up together, close in age and all. And it would be great if they could grow up in the same state—hint, hint. But I’ll take age for now.” Laurel knew that stab of envy again. Time was moving on. Blasted clock.

“That war whoop I heard better be from something good and not from pain or such. It

was loud enough to be heard across the canyon to the pens where I was working.” Jaxson’s sudden appearance caught them both by surprise. He was already dismounting from his horse, and Sammi Jo rose to meet him. Laurel remained seated, stuffing the used tissue from her tears inside one of her jean pockets.

“That lovely sound would have been my sister celebrating her impending auntie status.”

“I see. Well, we thought that might be it.”

“We?”

“Your husband and Lacy are over at the pens with the new yearlings and the vet. I said I’d ride up here and remind you that you have an engagement with the two of them, and since we are close by, he thought you might join them sooner than later. You’ll take the Jeep for the three of you. You do still know how to ride a horse, right? If I find you a tame one?” His gaze fell on Laurel in that moment. It was the first time he had actually spoken to her.

“Of course, I remember. It’s like riding a bike, or so I’ve been told. And you know I don’t like tame things.” She stood up, brushing imaginary dust from her jeans.

“Now that’s interesting,” he responded. “I thought maybe you had changed tastes in tame things, given your choice of fiancé and all. Living in California might have softened you up a bit.”

Her eyes flashed fire, and she opened her mouth to respond but caught sight of Sammi Jo’s interest in the exchange. Don’t tip your hand. You promised Sean. “Still waters do indeed run deep when you least expect.” Her response took some air out of his sails. He turned back to Sammi Jo, who moved to take her seat behind the wheel of the Jeep.

“I can just ride back to the pens with you, Sammi Jo. Then I can wait on Jaxson to find that horse for me.”

The engine flared. “Oh no. I want Jaxson to show you what we’ve done with the old stone building on Wisteria Hill. You take her back to the pens that way, Jaxson. Bye, you two!” And she made her escape. If Laurel didn’t know better, she might think her sister had an ulterior motive for stranding her with him. She shrugged that thought away.

“Too bad you didn’t think about bringing that tame horse with you on the way up here. It would have saved some time getting back to the main house. But you’re a busy man, so we don’t have to go out of the way to see a pile of old rocks. No need to let my sister know we left that off the agenda.”

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“She wants you to see those old rocks, as you put it, and that stands as an order to my way of thinking. I don’t intend to lie to her. That’s not how we do things in Texas. Maybe in California, but not here.” He had swung up into the saddle and sat watching her from his perch. Was he taunting her? Had he guessed the lie she and Sean were engaged in? Why did that comment about lying rub her the wrong way? He was even more infuriating than she remembered. There was nothing left for it. She approached the side of the big bay animal.

“Which way you want it? Front or back? Lady’s choice.” That was pure Jaxson messing with her brain, trying to get a rise of temper, and that had led to some things in the past best left forgotten.

“Seeing the back of you is always preferable.” She placed the tip of her boot into the empty stirrup in front of her and a strong arm reached down and hoisted her none too gently onto the broad back of the animal. He didn’t bother to tell her to hold on. But she had to make a quick grab around his middle as he tapped the horse’s sides and sent them off into a faster gait than normal. If he had hoped to dislodge her and send her onto the ground on her backside, she was more than determined to disappoint him. So what if she had to hug his waist for dear life? And bury her face against his broad back that smelled of an earthy male mix of horse, earth, a hint of manly cologne all mixed together and waking up senses that were best dormant. They couldn’t reach their destination soon enough.

The pile of rocks referred to what was left of an old white sandstone and dirty red limestone building from the late 1880s that was comprised of one full end wall and less than a fourth of a side one, and then the rest had ended in a crumbled heap of old rocks, as she referred to them. Old wisteria branches snaked their way over, under,

and around the stones, and in blooming season, it had been a spot of beauty for Laurel. She would often ride out and spend time in solitude with her daydreams and the peace of the world around her. It was a while before she realized Jaxson, too, knew her secret spot. But he'd never intruded until one wildly stormy spring afternoon. And that had changed some things. But Laurel preferred to leave that memory buried in the pile of stone.

Except it wasn't a pile of stone she raised her head and looked upon when they finally stopped moving. She recognized the stand of willow trees standing tall, like sentinels guarding the grassy spot. In the center stood a small stone building—a church by virtue of the white wooden cross at the top of the roof eave. And six glass windows shone light inside the small interior from whole walls that stood straight. She was mesmerized at the change. And who else would have envisioned what the heap of old stones could have been transformed into? It was as if someone knew what her heart had always known and set out to bring it to life. As far as she could remember, she had only mentioned her fanciful musings to one person in those days so long ago.

Jaxson.

“I always knew this place was special. I'm so glad others saw it, too, and brought it back to life.”

This time, Jaxson gently lowered her until the ground touched her feet. There was a mat of soft green grass, which should amaze her for even growing in such a spot. But it seemed right that it do so now. Her eyes caught sight of the simple rock fountain—nothing grand, but it fit into the picture, with water softly cascading over the smooth-faced stones to disappear into a pool at the base and then reappear again as it tumbled down the side of the hill.

“This stream and the natural rock... it lends itself to the peace of everything.” Laurel's tone was soft as she surveyed the scene.

She moved forward. The brown wooden door swung open beneath her touch, and she stepped inside. The ghosts of her past weren't there to greet her, but peaceful memories were. Eight wooden pews, four on each side of the aisle, led to a simple altar with a single carved cross standing in its center. The light spilled through the tall windows along the side, and she could imagine the golden light that would filter through the glass tiles fitted into the cross shape in the back wall above the altar. Stained glass wisteria blooms were fitting. Laurel sank into one of the pews. She wasn't alone; Jaxson took a space behind her.

"Not what you expected to find, was it?"

"Not in the least. It is amazing. From what most people wrote off over the years as just an ugly pile of rocks came all of this. It was a gem in hiding. How did this happen?"

Their tones were hushed out of simple respect.

"Well, you always said you found such peace in this spot. And so did one or two others. Your grandmother had it researched right before she died. And the results came in after you had left for California. Sammi Jo decided that if the hands were amenable, it would go back to being the source of peace and comfort to weary souls. It seems it was the only church known to exist on the trails between Abilene, Wichita Falls, and Lubbock for decades way back then. Seems one of the Burkitt ancestors married a girl who wanted a church wedding, but there being none, he began building one... a very crude one back in the 1800s, constructed by a cowboy who wasn't a stonemason but wanted to gift his bride with a real church.

"We all agreed it shouldn't be allowed to just rot away. So, on off times, the ones who were free would gather up here and figure out how to put her back together. I think we did a fairly good job. And we've had special things here—baptisms of some ranch kids, memorials, Fourth of July stuff. Mostly, it is open to anyone on the ranch

just to stop by and get some refreshing in their souls. Or for a girl to dream her dreams inside. Suppose that might sound a bit hokey now to a city girl.”

Laurel stood. He did as well. She met his gaze. “This city girl still has a country heart. I think this place was always special, whether it was a pile of weed-covered rocks or a cross-topped well where people can find that refresher of soul and heart. It was always meant to be here for that purpose. And to know it was built with such love and intent from a groom to his bride... that is even more special. I am so glad my sister wanted me to see this. And if you don’t mind, I’ll meet you down at the pens in a few minutes. I would like to spend some time here alone. I can find my way down the hill with little effort.” She turned away and resumed her seat. In a moment or two, she heard his retreating booted feet on the wooden floor.

*

Three quarters of an hour later, Laurel was seated on the back of a lively dappled gray quarter horse with a long gray mane and tail. He was a gelding that definitely still held some fire in the huge almond-shaped eyes and the set of his head and the constant movement of his ears.

“I take it that your mount meets with your approval?” Those were the first words Jaxson had spoken with her since he had waited patiently for her to join him at the pens. The gray was saddled and ready when she arrived.

“Yes, I believe he does. What’s his name?”

“Silver Dollar. He’s got some speed and some quick moves. He was trained as a cutter. So I would not put you on him around a group of horses or cattle or anything else in a herd. He does love the thrill of the action still.”

“I’ll remember that. Thanks for the heads-up. It feels good to be on the back of a

good horse again.”

“You look like you still belong there.”

She pulled up the reins and looked at the man inches from the side of her mount. He stopped as well.

“I believe that was a compliment. Something I haven’t heard from you in ages. What’s brought about the change? Old age?”

Laurel tried to play the moment off with some humor. That happened a lot in the old days, when Jaxson could make her nervous simply by his quietness with her.

“Maybe so. We’re all growing older, present company included, but not all wiser.” He gave a small upturn of the corner of one side of his mouth and urged his horse back into a canter. He had the last laugh.

Same Jaxson...and she realized a stunning fact. She had missed that Jaxson, and all the others he could be too. But maybe she had come home too late. She had been replaced by someone named Arabella, and she had dealt the hand of cards they were holding now. Jaxson would play his out. Laurel had the sinking feeling she’d dealt herself the losing hand.

Chapter Four

“Sorry we’ve nothad time to sit down and really talk about what brought you here to begin with.” Sammi Jo grinned. “Of course, that’s besides the great need you had to see your younger sister again.”

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Laurel gave Sammi Jo one of her usual looks that spoke its own language, along with a toss of her head against the back of the leather settee. She propped her sock-clad feet up on the low coffee table in front of her.

“So now, instead of twin sister, you have settled for younger. You must be feeling those years after all.” She took a sip of the wine her sister had handed her as she sat down. “Say, is this the wine I sent you and Beau from California right after the wedding?”

“Sorry, but afraid not. Why? Is there something wrong with it?”

Laurel had taken a second taste. “Far from it. This is really good.”

“Glad you approve, as it is one of our Texas wines. Those grapes came from right up the road, a couple of hours away from Lubbock. And the rest of the country is discovering them too. Just something else we have, and you all want.” The smile was pure smugness in a sweet sisterly way. They both laughed.

“Funny you should put it that way. It’s a perfect segue into the topic at hand. The second reason I came here besides seeing you, which is first and always.”

Sammi Jo scrunched deeper into the cushions of her chair and nodded. “I’m all ears.”

“I want to return home.”

Laurel grinned. The look on her sister’s face was priceless, a combination of shock and total disbelief.

Sammi Jo shook her head.

“My hearing might be going.” She gave another, harder, shake of her head as if trying to dislodge something from her ear.

“Very funny. You heard right. I have a plan, or rather, Sean and I do. This would be a joint venture that he and I believe in totally. All those wide-open spaces I inherited figure into the plan. But I want you to know what is in my mind and hopefully give your blessing to it. I wouldn’t think of going ahead with it if you have a problem with any of the plan.”

“This sounds a bit ominous. Why would you need or want my blessing in order to come home and use the land you inherited? Wait... you aren’t planning to build a few hundred housing subdivisions or smoke-belching plants or something even worse out there, are you?”

Laurel laughed and turned on the couch to face her sister full-on, legs tucked under her. “No to all of that. But I would be building on a small part of the land. The idea, though, is to keep as much of it as pristine and natural as possible, because that is the drawing card.”

“Oh, geez.” Sammi Jo sat her glass of juice down on the low table and mirrored Laurel’s position on the couch. “You aren’t thinking of bringing in tenderfoots from the city for some cowboy experience, are you?”

“That would be a hugeno way.” Laurel cut to the heart of the matter. “I want to build state-of-the-art soundstages to film movies, television series, documentaries, you name it. It would be all-inclusive, along with a filmmaker mini-campus, if you will. We would be fostering the filmmakers of tomorrow. Filmmakers would have a vastness of unspoiled space to make out to be the Wild West or a faraway planet—whatever their imaginations can create. It would be a canvas for them to be

creative. Of course, it would mean that Burkitt might gain a couple more stores and places to eat or whatever, but that would be good. And locals would be the first employed. It's our land, our facilities, and we control all of it, and that includes growth and the rules. And if cowboys are needed, Aces High could supply them—if they are available and want to earn some very nice amounts of extra money. We would also pay top dollar for good horseflesh when needed. It would be a win-win situation for all of us.”

She paused to catch her breath and allow Sammi Jo to ingest the ideas thus far.

“But the also-good news is that we already have a couple of the really big industry studios and names who want to jump on board and schedule use of facilities we haven't even built yet for projects they have been dying to get moving on.”

Sammi Jo nodded. “I can tell you've given this some thought. And it sounds like a major undertaking.”

“And I promise that, first and foremost, none of this would interfere in any way with the Aces High. This would all be many miles from even the closest fence line to the northeast of Burkitt. All entrances and buildings would be on the far side, with state-of-the-art security systems in place.”

“Sounds to me like you've thought this all out for some time,” Sammi Jo responded. Good. She wasn't totally tossing the idea into the closest wastebasket but plying each layer of information before slamming any gates shut. “And I will wager that your briefcase probably contains all kinds of surveys and drawings and spreadsheets. Because you always cross every ‘T’ and dot every ‘I’ and then triple-check it all. How you managed to contain yourself until now is surprising to me.”

“I thought I'd lay out all of those things later on that long table in the library, and then Sean would thrill you with his acumen on square footage and costs compared to

value. I wanted to test the waters with you first. So have I totally blown your mind?"

Sammi Jo sat still, her face giving away nothing of what her thoughts might be. Laurel might have really gone too far in her estimation of what her sister would think of the whole idea.

"Okay, so let me have it." Laurel finally broke the silence. "I can take anything but the silence, which is usually not your standard reaction."

Sammi Jo's face changed slowly, ending with a broad grin. "I enjoy seeing you sweat occasionally. It has its own feeling of supreme power, so I was just enjoying it for the moment."

"You would."

"My first reaction is to the first statement you made: 'I want to come home.' That holds the most importance for me. I am hoping that means just that—you would be coming home for good. Not just to check on things now and then leave. To have you back here on Burkitt land, to have our small family whole, is the answer to a long-held prayer of mine. Whatever brings you back here is going to get my full endorsement, you know that! And you have this whole floor of the house to stay in until you decide where or if you want to move or build or whatever. I am so excited!"

"Home for good... if you can stand me around all the time."

The hug that followed made all the possibilities of the future seem even more real in Laurel's mind. "I'm super-excited too. This is going to be incredible, and I know it will be a big step, but Grandmother always told us, 'Go biggest or get out of Dodge.' I cannot imagine what she would say about this idea or the fact that I came back to this ranch."

“I think she knew you’d be back, sooner or later. The land always wins in the end—one of Grandad’s sayings. And I discover how true that is every day I walk across it.” Sammi Jo stood. “Let’s go downstairs and find Beau and share the good news. Then we should celebrate with dinner in town at Dawson’s. How does that sound?”

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Laurel grinned and joined her sister. “It sounds pretty darn amazing. Better than any fancy restaurant in Hollywood.”

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The celebration dinner was in full swing a couple of hours later. A large round table in the back dining room of Dawson’s had been secured. Sean, Beau, and Lacy had joined them, and Sammi Jo and Beaudry had sat amazed as they listened to Laurel and Sean lay out their plans for the business. Beaudry kept glancing over at the happy look on Sammi Jo’s face and he answered with some smiles of his own.

“I have to admit that this is a major surprise, but it’s also a welcome one. Anything that puts that look on my wife’s face makes me glad. And from a business standpoint, I think it might be a good investment you’ve got there. While anything is a gamble these days, having those major commitments already for something that hasn’t even broken ground right now is amazing. And I’ll be happy to be a wrangler for you on days that you have some of those glamorous leading ladies on set. It might be interesting to learn the movie business at that.” He threw a wink across at Sammi Jo, who just shook her head.

Jaxson pulled into the empty space in front of the restaurant. He had gotten the message an hour ago and had debated with himself all the while he showered and changed into a fresh shirt and jeans, then drove the ten miles into Burkitt at the speed limit. Perhaps it would give him time to talk himself out of going at all. He could tell Beaudry something came up that needed his attention. But then there would be questions and Beaudry would be concerned, and so Jaxson ruled it out. He had spent enough time with Laurel that afternoon.

“You thought it would be so easy to just have a simple conversation, then leave her and get back to a normal day,” he said out loud to no one. He had felt sure he could pull it off. Laurel’s coming back would not affect his life again. He had moved forward, just as she had told him to do. Met a wonderful lady who made it no secret she thought he was amazing, and she was definitely more than interested in a long-term gig. So why should Laurel even be figuring into his thoughts?

Because you are weak. And a glutton for punishment. But she’ll be on that plane soon enough, and that will be that, and life can get back to normal and stay that way.

“Sorry I’m late.” Jaxson announced his arrival as he took the seat next to Lacy, and across from Laurel and Sean. “I was over in the south cattle pens when the message about a party at Dawson’s beeped on my cell. So, someone want to fill me in on what was left out?”

“Aunt Laurel is coming back to the ranch to stay. And she is going to bring movies with her.” Lacy supplied that bit of information with a fair amount of excited anticipation.

Jaxson looked only a little less confused. He glanced over at Lauren and Sean. “Back to Texas? To make a movie?”

“Lots of movies, hopefully,” Sean spoke up. “Mesa Grande Studio Complex will break ground this week if this lady beside me has her way. With three movies in pre-production in Hollywood, things will start moving fast.”

“To fill in the blanks and ease that confusion in your eyes,” Beaudry added for his brother’s sake, “these two people are going to be making movies on Laurel’s land inheritance. And the real celebration is that Laurel will be returning to live here as well. So, we are celebrating both things tonight.”

Jaxson sat still, his mind wrapping around the words. Laurel was moving back to the ranch. She would be an everyday fixture in their lives. Along with the man seated beside her. And Jaxson had never felt less like celebrating. All the small amount of confidence he had talked himself into earlier on the way into town evaporated like a quick summer shower. Or sand through his fingers. Many other comparisons he could make, but everyone was looking at him, and they needed not to be drawing the wrong conclusions by his silence.

Jaxson picked up the water glass in front of him—he had not had time to order anything stronger. “Here’s to homecomings and prosperous business ventures,” he gave as a toast. “May they both give you what you want.” His eyes met Laurel’s in a steady gaze. It took a lot of willpower to draw them away and focus on the menu that appeared with the waitress. He would worry about the ramifications it would all bring to his world later, when he was alone and away from curious eyes. In the meantime, he needed to keep his wits about him and appear normal. As though any news that Laurel had just imploded his well-ordered life with wasn’t even a ripple of concern.

“It’s going to be so cool having my aunt here and then having movie stars too. And you’ll have your wedding here and can I be in that? In a really amazing dress and—”

“Lacy,” Sammi Jo said with a smile, “one step at a time. Let’s just be grateful that our family will all be here together once again.”

Wedding—there was that. Jaxson’s fingers tightened their grasp on the tea glass he had been served. He nodded at the waitress, who came forward to take his bar order. Things were turning upside down and moving like a merry-go-round. He had some decisions to make sooner rather than later.

He nodded here and there, acting as though he were interested in the conversations going on around him, but only half listening to them. He consumed his meal as fast as he could with good manners. The food was its usual great taste, he was sure, yet he

really tasted cardboard. It was not the cook's fault. The two times he had ventured a glance across the table, he had been caught out by the woman across from him. Jaxson hoped his demeanor gave nothing away. But then Beau mentioned his name and grabbed his attention away from the slice of pie in front of him.

"I'm sorry. I missed what you were saying. I was thinking about the new mares we have arriving early in the morning from Abilene."

"Well, I was saying that you would be happy to take Sean and Laurel out to the area to meet their surveyors and contractor. Tom and Davis are here now to help out in the stables more, and that should free you up to be point person as needed to help our new neighbors get settled and see they have what they need to help them out. You'll be glad to handle that, wouldn't you? Sammi Jo can't be running along those rough roads all that much. We'll need to count on you."

Jaxson knew that Sammi Jo's health was only part of his brother's equation. But it was indeed the most important part, and he would do what was needed—no matter what else he might feel about it. And he and Beau would have a private discussion later. He nodded and sent a smile in Sammi Jo's direction. "Whatever it takes to keep my godchild and his mother happy and safe, I am the man."

"Godchild? Him?" Laurel's sudden question was fueled by sheer surprise.

"Yes, this old cowhand was asked to be a godfather, and I accepted. The part of it might be my hopeful expectation. Objections?"

He had to give Laurel credit. She managed to recover in record time. Even managed to cast a half smile in his direction. "No objections. It isn't my decision. I just hadn't realized plans had been made so soon for all of that."

"Well, since we are on the subject, you can be equally shocked to learn that Beau and

I want you to be godmother. What do you think about that?”

Sweet Jesus. It just gets worse. Jaxson kept his response to himself. Another connection they would have on certain occasions. Just when he was trying to extricate himself from the spell of Laurel Burkitt over his heart and life, he was being reeled back in like a fish on a hook. The question became, how did he free himself before he drowned?

Chapter Five

“Ouch! Is this the best road there is? I thought it was a real road we were taking to see where the buildings are going to be.” Sean’s hand shot upward to steady himself against the ceiling of the Jeep for the third time since they’d left the main house. His other hand had stationed itself against the door beside him. Jaxson glanced in the rearview mirror. He tried not to smile.

“Some roads are paved, but this is a shortcut—a back road we take to get from one point to another in a short amount of time. Just one of the things you’ll have to get used to living on a ranch. It’s not your big city with freeways to get you from point A to point B at seventy miles an hour.”

“To answer your real question, Sean,” Laurel interjected from her seat on the passenger side of the front, “the complex will be reached by a double-lane, paved road that exits off the main highway. Any auxiliary roads we need will be paved. In the areas where filming would take place outside the soundstages, there would be roads or paths not much better than the one we’re on. We want to keep it as untouched as possible. However, I, too, thought we would be taking the highway around to the entrance.”

A pointed glare landed on Jaxson.

“Well, I had considered saddling up the horses and taking you across country that way, giving you a real introduction to the ranch and all. But that would have taken a couple hours at best. Youdoride, don’t you, Sean? We’ll pick out a good mount for you at the barn. We’ll get you out on the land with us. That way you can better see what all it has to offer on film.”

“That’s good of you, Jaxson.” He tried to manage a smile, but it came off as more of a wince as somehow another deep rut made the Jeep jerk, and Sean made another grab to stay in the seat. “I have a passing acquaintance with horses. I think I’ll leave it to the stuntmen to handle those things on film.”

“I see.” This time it was Jaxson’s turn to toss a glance and a slight hint of a smile at the woman still glaring at him. “Well, horses and the outdoors aren’t everyone’s cup of tea. I’m sure you must have other good points that caught Laurel’s eye. She always did prefer the finer things over the dirt and sweat of hard ranch work. So, you two are a good match.”

“Thanks, I think,” Sean managed a mumbled response.

Laurel must have felt the veiled insult because she changed the subject to business talk that left Jaxson on the sidelines in silence. Which was fine by him. He wasn’t a babysitter, and before the day was over, he intended to come to an understanding with his brother about the insane idea of his time being taken as a glorified chauffeur for Laurel and her peacock boyfriend. He kept his thoughts on getting through the next couple of hours as quickly as possible and depositing them both back at the ranch.

However, he did search out the roughest spots ahead of them—just to keep everyone awake. But he should have known Laurel would not let his little game go unnoted.

Thirty minutes later, while Sean was in animated conversation with the contractor on the largest soundstage site, Laurel came up behind where Jaxson was leaning against one of the old cement sides of an empty stock tank. His mind was on how much daylight they were wasting.

“Did you enjoy your childish antics this morning?”

He pushed the brim of his hat back on his forehead and turned his attention to the irritated female in front of him. She was speaking in lowered tones so the others wouldn’t hear, but that still allowed the words to hit the targets she wanted with their sting.

“Childish? I wouldn’t call them that. Just helping to make sure that fiancé of yours gets the clear picture of what he is in store for if he is serious about moving out to the middle of nowhere from his rarefied Hollywood existence. Something tells me that you haven’t been as transparent on some things, so I’m just being helpful with the things you might have forgotten in your haste.”

“Your help is neither wanted nor appreciated. And for the record, it wasn’t my idea that you would be the one chosen to be our guide. I fully intend to let my brother-in-law know that we can do without your services.”

“That puts us both on the same page. The last thing I need to waste time on is this latest whim of yours.”

“Whim?!” The sparks of fire were definitely shooting at him as she homed in her gaze on his. “This is no whim. I am going to put this area of Texas on the map for

moviemakers—all sorts of movies, not just Westerns. The location is perfect, the weather cooperates most of the time, and it is all mine, or at least a couple hundred thousand acres of it is. And I also get to come back to the people I've missed and love, and all those things are not whims. So, get over it, big cowboy boss. I am here to stay. Just consider me that proverbial thorn in your backside.”

“Oh, you are that all right. You always have been. But you staying here? I'll have to see that to believe it. Once that boyfriend gets his fill of this lifestyle, he'll be on that jet, and you'll be right beside him. Unless you don't love him all that much? Not much evidence of a love match, if you ask me. More like a convenient business arrangement.”

Darn the man!“You don't have a clue about me. You never did. And people do change. Maybe not a hardheaded, stubborn male like you, but others are capable of it. I know what I want and where I want to be, and I'm not leaving.”

“We'll see. I'll wager you won't last until spring.”

“If that's the best challenge you can do, you're on. What do I get when you lose?”

“I'll dance at your wedding.”

“You don't like to dance.”

“That's right. I don't plan to lose, so there won't be any need to dance.”

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“I recognize the slamming of the door, steps plodding up the staircase to your room, and another slam. Should I guess, or are you going to just tell me? What drew your temper today?”

“That insufferable foreman of yours. How can you put up with him? He is so arrogant and obnoxious and just so... just a...”

“Just his usual self that is very good at setting you off on a tirade. He always had that ability where you’re concerned. Ever thought about why that might be exactly?”

“Since when did my little sister gain a psychology degree?” Laurel plopped down upon the foot of her bed and began taking off the boots she had worn that morning. They landed on the thick carpet that muffled their fall.

“One doesn’t need a degree to know that this is usual behavior between you two... ever since you met when he told you that you had no idea how to saddle a horse correctly. That just seemed to be the start of such a beautiful love/hate relationship. We all just got used to it.”

Laurel stood quickly and moved to toss her jacket on the back of a chair. Then she caught a brush from the dresser and began combing through her hair with swift, determined movements. “There was no love in that equation. Hate would be acceptable. He hasn’t changed with age, either.”

Sammi Jo took a perch on the arm of the sofa, softly shaking her head. “What did he do this time to stir you up?”

“He was horrid to Sean on the way to the land today. He chose the worst, roughest dirt track to take us on. And then he had the gall to bet me that I wouldn’t still be here in the spring. That I would leave like I always do. I’ve got news for him—he is going to lose his bet. I am here to stay, and he can just get used to it.”

“Well, I am glad to hear such decisiveness in your tone. Lacy is positively on cloud nine with thoughts of you being around with all your movie stars and your fashion sense, and you certainly can’t disappoint her now.”

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“And I do not plan to do that. You know I had to leave. Just like you had to stay and fight for your dream. I had to find mine, and I did. And now I know that it can exist right here in Texas, among the people I love. So why can’t he just leave it alone?”

Sammi Jo finally stood and retrieved the brush from her hand. She made her sit down and she began a slower, methodical brushing of her sister’s hair. “Before you go bald, I will brush, and you can listen and do some deep breathing. It’s only natural that some people might doubt that you want to stay here, given that you couldn’t wait to get to the bright lights. And you couldn’t wait to get back to them after your brief visits to Texas. And there was always a cowboy who was there to watch you come and then watch you go, and we would have to put up with the snarly bear he would turn into for the month afterward. You know his feelings over the years. So cut him some slack. He’ll figure out that you mean what you say. And then you can show him, just like you will all the others, that you mean what you say by being here in the spring to welcome the newest member of this family.”

“If he had such feelings, he should have understood why I had to leave. And why wouldn’t he be glad I’m back and saying that I am staying?”

“Well, I would have to say that he might have had those feelings over the years, but feelings change just as people do. He waited a long time for you to have a change of heart about this place... and about him. Everyone has to move on with life at some point. You met someone. Why would it be hard to figure that so would he?”

Laurel caught Sammi Jo’s gaze in the mirror. Her raised hand stilled the brush. “You’re saying he had a change of heart? Does that change have a name? The woman in Abilene he had dinner with the other night? Why haven’t you said anything about

this change to me before now?”

“Maybe I figured it wasn’t news to impart long distance. Whether he’s chosen her, that’s not for me to say. But if he has, I’m happy for him. Jaxson is a good man, and he deserves to have a home and wife and kids of his own. I think he knows it’s time for that in his life, and he doesn’t plan to miss out on it. You can’t blame him for finally getting your message. But I ask again...why would it matter if he had moved on? You did.”

You did. Sammi Jo’s words hit home like an arrow. Of course, they would all think she had done just that by bringing Sean to the ranch. Not correcting anyone about their true relationship had probably not been one of her better ideas. But that was hindsight. No one ever moved forward by looking backward. That was a pearl of wisdom her grandmother had imparted, along with so many others.

If people believed that she wouldn’t stay, it was because she had not given them anything else to believe by her actions. If Jaxson doubted her, it was because she had told him to forget about her and any future with her in it, because she belonged elsewhere. And he had finally believed her.

The problem was, while he might have moved on, she hadn’t moved forward at all.

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“So, this is where you keep all this immensity working like a well-oiled machine? May I enter? I’ll just sit in a corner and observe—soak up the atmosphere, so to speak. It’s a large part of what I do before I get behind a camera and try to recreate it all,” said the man who stood in the doorway of Jaxson’s office.

Sean Collins had actually found his way through the traffic of trucks and trailers, animals and cowboys, moving in and out, having already been at their jobs well

before the sun rose. Yet, here was Laurel's dandy, as Jaxson had begun calling him in his mind. It suited the figure in front of him, with his starched and pressed designer jeans that likely cost more than most of those working hands in the stables made in a month. The sweater was another two weeks of pay, and the leather jacket and wool scarf casually, yet perfectly, draped loosely around his neck was a bit much for the day ahead. But then, who was Jaxson to enlighten him? Sean was Laurel's problem until they both climbed back on the jet that brought them and got out of his hair.

Jaxson stood, drawing the black Stetson down on his forehead and tucking his leather work gloves under his belt in their usual handy place for his workday. He began heading toward the door, leaving the visitor to follow or not.

"Things are a bit busy down here, so mind where you step. Visitors could easily get hurt one way or another. That's why they are discouraged." Take the hint and leave.

"I'll just keep out of the way and tag along, if I might. All this is great to allow me to soak up the atmosphere of a time and place."

"You'll be soaking in sweat if you think you're dressed for where I'm headed. Once the sun heats up a bit more, and the usual wind dies down, you'll be in an oven for a few hours."

"It gets warm in California. I think I'll be fine."

Jaxson slid the usual dark lenses of his aviators on his face. They served to shield his thoughts a good part of the time. And this moment was no different. He grabbed a chaff of hay as he stepped past it and stuck it between his lips. It also helped to have something to bite down on and keep certain comments at bay. He had a feeling he would need a lot more hay before the day was done.

"Suit yourself. Keep up or leave, but no one has time to be a tour guide today."

Jaxson went about his work, barking orders, his eyes on all the activity. He made his way through all three large stables, vaguely aware of a shadow behind him. A couple of times, he was sure that a horse and cowboy was about to send Sean running back to the safety of the main house, but he stayed.

They pushed through one of the large sliding doorways, and they were inside a fenced area with a dozen or so horses milling and moving about. There were seven cowboys with their ropes in hand, awaiting Jaxson's instructions. He stood for a few moments, eyeing the herd. Then he nodded and called out a cowboy. "TJ, the red roan." The cowboy moved forward into the horses, his rope ending up around the neck of a large animal. He led it toward the distant gate.

"So, what is this all about?" Sean's words hung in the air for a few moments. Jaxson wasn't going to speak up, as his attention was on the work at hand. It was an older cowhand who stood at the back of the group, observing the younger ones. A spate of tobacco left his cheek. Sean moved his leather dress boots back a foot or so.

"The boss man is choosing the mounts for some of our newer hands. They'll work with them and get to know each other. They'll be partners."

"What if they don't like each other?"

"The boss always knows the best pairing ninety-nine percent of the time. If they don't work out, it's for a more serious reason than liking. So, the horse is sidelined, and we older fellas get to figure out what's up. The cowboy gets another mount."

There were six horses left in the pen after all the cowboys had led their mounts away. Jaxson turned and found Sean was at his elbow.

"You're still here."

“Yes, and I’d like to be paired with one of these horses, if I might. Since I should see the ranch on the back of a horse, as you mentioned yesterday. I’m sure you could pick the most suitable one for me. That would be okay, wouldn’t it?”

Jaxson did his best to keep a straight face as he spat a blade of straw out of the corner of his mouth. He sized up the man in front of him for a moment or two. Then he turned to the remaining horses. Here was a moment he should be able to relish by putting the Hollywood man in the Texas dirt. But as much as he might enjoy the scene it would make, something stopped him. The man wanted to learn. Maybe Jaxson could end up doing Laurel a favor. She at least deserved to have a guy who could get on a horse. Maybe even last for five minutes.

He should have kicked Sean out of the stable the moment he showed up. Choosing the high road was not what Jaxson wanted to do with his day.

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“These are all born and bred ranch horses. They work for their living. But if you want a horse, we’ll get you one.” He looked over to the older man waiting for orders. “Larry, you go bring Jinx out to the yard for our friend here. Don’t saddle him, though. We’ll start with the basics for him.”

“Jinx? Yes sir, boss.” The man headed off toward another barn.

Jaxson headed back inside the stable, Sean beside him. “I take it that Jinx is special, because he’s in a barn and not out in the pens with the other horses?”

Jaxson made a brief snort under his breath. “He’s special. But I’m sure you two can come to an understanding in no time. You are such a hands-on, take-charge type and all.”

“I try to be,” Sean responded.

“Let’s move Jinx into the small arena,” Jaxson called across the cavernous enclosure to where Larry was leading a large gray animal with black stockings and markings on his face that lent it almost the look of a mask—a not-friendly one at that. Opening the gate, Jaxson motioned for Sean to go ahead of him.

Sean’s steps slowed a bit as Jaxson neared the horse with its saddle blanket.

The animal’s head jerked the bridle in Larry’s hands, and Jinx blew a gust of air from his nostrils. Black eyes watched their approach. Lesser people might have stopped several feet away. Jaxson moved right up to the animal and ran his hand down along the massive neck and across the back. His voice was low and authoritative.

“With this one, there is no hesitation. You show him who is the boss from the get-go. He’s a handful, but you seem to be ready for the challenge. Right? If not, we can always get another, older animal in here.”

“No problem,” Sean spoke up. “We’ll get along, I’m sure.”

“Don’t suppose you know how to saddle him? You familiar with Western saddling? I can do it for you if you need me to,” Larry made the offer.

“You can go on and help out with the ones that need to be culled for the cattle work this afternoon. I’ll get our guest here squared away,” Jaxson replied, taking the bridle reins in his hands.

Larry left them with a good luck shot in Sean’s direction and a laugh under his breath.

“Is there anything I need to know about this horse? His temperament? He seems a bit high-strung the way he’s moving about.”

“He’s a horse. You’re the rider. You two will get to know each other soon enough. So, step up and rub your hand along his neck and back like I did earlier. Keep your voice low and steady.”

Sean took a second or two and then followed the instructions. His hand touched the animal’s neck and Jinx jerked his head up and away. Sean took a couple of steps back quickly.

“Do it again. You can’t let him get away with anything.”

To Sean’s credit, he stepped up again and this time his hand made it to the animal’s back. His smile was triumphant. “We’re going to be friends. I knew it.”

“No time to rest on your laurels. Pick up the saddle blanket and put it in the middle of his back and bring it up to just this point,” Jaxson instructed, his free hand showing the point where the blanket should rest. Sean went to do just that.

“He’s a bit tall. Maybe a step ladder might help out,” Sean made a small joke as he was on tiptoes trying his third attempt to get the blanket situated. “If he would just stay still, it would help.”

“This is one of the things his rider would teach him, with patience and repetition and a commanding presence and tone. Now that the blanket is on him, pick up the saddle, one hand on the horn of the saddle and one underneath, and hoist it over the back. Hook the stirrup on the opposite side over the pommel of the saddle to hold it out of the way. It’s easier that way.”

The second try was a failure, but it also sent Sean on his backside in the dirt of the arena. Sean picked himself up and made an effort to wipe his now-dirty jeans off as best he could. The scarf went along with the jacket very quickly to lay over a top rung of the fence.

“Okay then, let’s do this again. Jinx, it’s going to be third chance is a charm.”

Jaxson had to admit he hadn’t expected him to continue with the impromptu lesson. But neither did Jaxson have a lot of time to waste his day on teaching a greenhorn to saddle a horse. Keeping the reins in one hand, he reached down and grabbed the saddle horn, and with one swift movement, the saddle landed on the animal’s back. “Now step up, and I’ll talk you through the rest of it.”

“Impressive. You managed to do that with one hand. Do you lift weights in your off time?” Sean moved up as instructed.

“It’s a lifetime of ranch work. That’s better than any fancy gym. Now take that long

strap and bring it up and through the metal ring.” He continued to talk Sean’s movements to the completion of the saddling of the horse. Jaxson stepped forward and checked and tightened the girth strap.

“Now it’s time to get on board. Take the reins in your left hand, place that same hand on the saddle horn, your left foot in the stirrup, and then push off from the ground and swing your right leg over the back. Your right foot goes into the right stirrup.”

“You made that sound so easy.” Sean was trying to get the reins situated in his palm.

Jaxson repeated it all. And Sean made it through to the very last part where his leg was going over the back of the animal, but the animal was no longer standing still. Jinx had hit his own green light. And that sent Sean onto his backside once again.

“What in the world is going on? Jaxson, are you trying to kill him? Sean, are you okay?” Laurel had made her entrance at that same moment, and she was not pleased, to say the least. She was beside Sean and helping him to his feet at lightning speed while shooting daggers across at Jaxson. Jinx had made a circuit of the arena and came to a stop a short distance away, eyeing the humans he had just outmaneuvered. And he was not the least apologetic. Neither was Jaxson.

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“No one was trying to kill anyone. Your boyfriend wanted to ride a horse, so I was teaching him how to saddle one and then ride. But he wasn’t quite quick enough for Jinx and his habit of taking off when he feels pressure in the stirrup. There’s no harm done, except to his fancy duds.”

“I’m fine, Laurel,” Sean spoke up. “Nothing a little soak in a hot tub won’t make better. Along with a change of clothes. I’ll take a rain check today but will be ready for another lesson tomorrow, Jaxson. I appreciate your time and your help today.”

“I’ve got to meet the surveyor and his crew at the site, but I won’t be long. Get some rest and I’ll be back soon.” Laurel waited until he was out of earshot and through the exit to the outside. She rounded on Jaxson, hands on hips, ready to hand him a piece of her mind. But he was ahead of her.

“The truck is outside, so no use wasting time or breath on the same old subject. You don’t want to be late for your meeting.” He was already steps ahead of her.

Once outside, she slowed as she watched him open her passenger door and then move around the front of the vehicle to slide in behind the steering wheel.

“I know how to drive a pickup. I don’t need a driver. You forget, I know every inch of this ranch, the same as you do.”

“I have to check in at the base camp, which is in the same direction, so climb in, and let’s stop wasting daylight.”

“How could I possibly ignore such a warm invitation to spend more time in your

pleasant company?” The sarcasm dripped from her words, along with the fake smile she added as she slid into the seat and shut the door beside her, none too gently.

“Pleasant is certainly the word for the day,” he had to add as he stepped on the gas.

Neither felt an overwhelming need to make conversation on the way to the destination, and Laurel was happy to focus on the natural beauty of the land outside her open window.

“There is definitely something to be said for peace and quiet. Makes for a relaxing—”

“Do you think he’ll leave the ranch because you put him on a rank horse and roughed him up? Is that your plan? Well, it failed.”

Jaxson shook his head and gritted his teeth, which only set his jaw in a harder line. The woman could push his buttons faster than anything. “Whether he leaves or not is your problem, not mine. I don’t have time to play games during my workday. He wanted a horse. I wanted to make certain he knew what he was doing. So he wouldn’t hurt himself or the horse.”

“Is that all?”

“And just maybe he might look like he fit in a little better as your fiancé. But he’ll need more help along those lines than I can give him. There’s your welcoming party waiting for you.” He pulled to a stop for her to exit. She did so, and he put the truck back into gear. “I’ll be here to pick you up after I finish at the camp.” And that was that.

Darn woman. He hadn’t meant to add the last tidbit about trying to help her. But what did it matter anyway? The sooner they were gone from the ranch, the better. And that thought made him even madder at himself. What happened to the days when he could

wake up, get a good day's work in, and maybe have a relaxing evening with pleasant company? Arabella was already feeling neglected after he'd had to beg off twice from meeting her because of their guests.

Women.

Chapter Six

If she worried about having Jaxson's presence around the whole time she was conducting her business with the surveyors, then she had worried for nothing. He dropped her off and said he'd be back after he finished his business at the cow camp. That was fine with her. It would give her time to deal with the fact that she had overreacted to what she thought was going on in the barn between Jaxson and Sean. In his own cowboy way, Jaxson was taking the time to do something he clearly would not ordinarily have done during his workday, and he thought he was helping her. She needed to figure out how she felt about that turn of events. But first things first.

Laurel became focused on the business at hand. Every once in a while, she would give herself a mental shake. The dream she had only dared to think about over the last few years, the crazy idea that kept popping in and out of her thoughts every day until she could not ignore it any longer, had become a realizable dream, and now it was morphing into a reality before her eyes. She felt like she was poised on top of a roller-coaster drop, and any moment, the wildest ride of her life would begin. And she was ready for it.

She walked the lines and saw the stakes—all proof it was happening. The contractor and some of his crew arrived, and she okayed a few of their minor changes and gave approval to moving in the equipment a week earlier than expected. And when Big John Magee, the chief contractor, handed over the bright-blue hard hat with her initials painted in white lettering on the front, she placed it on her head and said those incredible words, "Let's get moving, gentlemen. Daylight's burning."

It was amid the laughter and banter that she spied Jaxson leaning against the front grillwork of his truck, arms folded across his broad chest, legs folded over each other in much the same manner. Those indomitable dark glasses kept her from seeing anything resembling his true thoughts. Was he still upset with her? She excused herself from the group and walked to where he stood.

“That’s certainly a different addition to your usual wardrobe. Wear it in Hollywood, maybe add a few sparkles here and there, and it might start a new trend.”

Laurel took the hat off, shaking her head a bit to free her hair. The man was not going to ruin her mood. “It could just do that. But they won’t see it because I won’t be there. I will be wearing it right here, in my own backyard. Finish your business? I’m thinking lunch should be ready by now, and I have a great appetite.” She beat him inside the truck.

“Your attitude has certainly changed since I last saw you a couple of hours ago,” he observed, heading them back to the ranch.

“Yes, it has. There’s something about taking that long walk off a short pier, and then finding that you didn’t drown, and you just might enjoy the swim. Guess you don’t know what I’m talking about, but I do and that’s fine.”

“I’d say that once in a while, the rest of us mortals might have made such an acquaintance with a dream or goal falling in our favor. I’d think, though, that what with your awards for your screen work, that you’d be a bit morejadedmaybe? For want of a better description.”

“Jaded? Never do I take anything for granted and certainly not in the land of make-believe and huge egos. No, this today was different. We beat the odds and are following our guts. And it seems to be the right path. I know there will be those days to come when I will think why in the world did I ever get myself into all of this, but I

also know that they will pass, and the end will be worth every headache, every glitch, every dime of overage. Grandmother always said that the best day is when you realize that you have grabbed hold of the one thing you were meant to do, and you hang onto it as if your life depends on it, because life won't mean the same without it. Funny, I hadn't thought of those words until now."

"When they would mean the most," Jaxson countered, his glance meeting hers for a moment. And Laurel forgot to be on guard with him for a few moments. But that peace offering was forgotten as the truck swerved, and Jaxson applied the brakes along with some choice and colorful words as he gripped the steering wheel.

When Laurel looked up, she saw the animal in the middle of the road that they had almost hit with the truck.

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“Is that a coyote? What’s he got in his mouth? A rabbit?”

Jaxson reached for the rifle he kept in the enclosed compartment above the front seat. Most ranchers were armed for such cases. Coyotes were the enemy in this area of the country. They were nature’s poachers on the herds of cattle and horses and anything else they could catch and eat.

“Wait, Jaxson.” Laurel’s hand on his arm halted his exit. “It’s not a rabbit. It’s a puppy. Or is it a baby coyote?”

“Whatever it is, the animal is going away.”

“It is a puppy. Where did he get it?” Then Laurel did an unexpected thing. She was out of the door on her side, the helmet on her head.

Jaxson intercepted her with fast movements, jerking her back to his side. “Are you crazy? And do you think that hard hat is the attire to take on a hungry coyote? Get back in the truck.”

“We need to save the puppy. We need to make him... oh, shoot.”

The coyote was on the move.

Jaxson made fast tracks into the ditch and then sliced through the fencing without any problem. He disappeared into the thick underbrush on the other side. Laurel waited for the sound of a gunshot, but none came. In a few minutes, Jaxson came back.

“I would have loved to shoot if you had done what I said and gotten in the truck and let me do just that.” Jaxson was clearly not pleased.

“Shush.” She made the quick sound, her hand grabbing his shoulder, her gaze moving around the roadway.

“What are—?”

“Shh, listen. There it is again.” And Laurel began heading toward the ditch to her right.

“Don’t go into those weeds. You know better. Stop now, Laurel.” Jaxson muttered another expletive when she did not stop.

He caught up to her as she headed toward a large cement pipe opening just ahead at the bottom of the ditch. He grabbed her arm and did not let go.

“You aren’t going to fool around down here.”

“Listen. You’ll hear it too.”

*

Jaxson clamped his mouth shut and then, yes, there was a sound... from the direction of the culvert opening. He shook his head. “This day has gone downhill fast. Go get back in the truck.”

“But—”

“Go back to the truck where I won’t have to worry about you, also, and I will check out whatever is inside that culvert making that sound. You’re wasting time by not

getting a move on.”

“Okay, I’m going. Please promise to check it all out.”

“Yes, Laurel, I am going to check it all out. And if there turns out to be nothing but a mean old rattler curled up in there for a nap and I wake him up... well, one of us will be really sorry.”

“You’ve got a gun. And I know first aid, and I’ll get you to a hospital super-fast. I promise.”

“How thoughtful. Then get moving fast back to that truck.”

He didn’t move until she had climbed back to the top of the ditch and he heard the door slam shut.

She evidently had opened the window. “I’m in here. What do you see in there?”

Jaxson shook his head. “Just be quiet so I can hear better.” This is crazy. I’m crazy.

The smell hit him first. Then there was a very small, strangled cry that had grown weaker since they heard it the first time. He edged forward, listening for whatever to make that sound again but also for anything else, like a rattle or a growl even. Cement road culverts during the heat of a Texas day provided shade and a little cool relief for all sorts of varmints, friendly and deadly alike.

He bent some in order to step inside the area, his hands tightening on the rifle he still held. At that moment, there was a rustle under a pile of leaves. He used the tip of the rifle to stir the leaves, and there was a tiny bundle of brown-and-white dirty fur covering some bones. The pup barely was old enough to have its eyes beginning to open. Jaxson bent and brushed the dirt away so that he could get a better look. Then

he gently moved his hand around the animal and lifted. It fit in the large palm and didn't have much strength to struggle.

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“Jaxson, what have you found? What’s the problem? Are you okay?”

Stubborn woman! She couldn’t listen and follow instructions. “I’m coming out. It’s okay.”

He made a quick survey of the area and found no sign of any other puppy or their mother. He wouldn’t venture on what might have happened had there been others. The pup had to have been there in the hot ditch for a couple of days. Jaxson made his way back to the opening. Laurel was standing a few feet away, anxiousness evident in her body and eyes that implored an answer.

“It’s a puppy. And he is in pretty bad shape.”

“Oh no. Oh, hand him to me. We’ve got to get help. Let’s go. Doc Andrews is the closest. We can call him on the way.” She wasn’t waiting for his response or input but was already moving quickly back up the side of the ditch and toward the truck. “Hurry! You said we don’t have time to waste. Let’s go.”

Jaxson secured the rifle, then turned the truck around, heading it toward Abilene on the fastest route possible. He hit the button programmed with the vet’s number. It was only a few minutes before they were filling the vet in on what they were heading his way with. He assured them he would be waiting.

Laurel had taken off the helmet and lined it with one of Jaxson’s bandanas from the back seat to make it softer. She also took a bottle of water from the small cooler Jaxson kept on hand for the workday. She placed droplets inside the pup’s mouth. Too much water would be worse than too little. But they needed to buy as much time

for the little one as she could. The pup lay still inside, and she was using two fingers to rub gently across the little body, using soft murmurs of encouragement as she did so. Jaxson tightened his grip on the wheel. The pup had bad odds against survival, and given Laurel's soft heart with animals, it would crush her. If only he had taken a different road when they left the job site. But it wasn't any use wishing that now.

"How did this baby get left out here in the middle of nowhere? Do you think its mother had her litter in that culvert?"

"Something like that. People still drive out along some country road and dump their problems on others' hands. There aren't many happy endings when an animal gets dumped. No luck for most of them."

"But this little one will be one, a lucky one. In fact, I'll call him Lucky."

"Please don't go getting too attached. He's in pretty bad shape, Laurel. You're setting yourself up to be heartbroken."

"Stop that, Jaxson." She turned her attention on him, and her gaze cornered his. "I know the odds are against him. But there is still a chance, no matter how little. Where there is one who believes, that's better than none. He's got us on his side now. So, move it faster."

"Yes, ma'am. Faster, it is."

*

Jaxson was aware that his companion in the front seat was more upset than she was letting on after Doc Andrews had not been hopeful about saving the puppy. Memories of other critters over the years and her too-soft heart came back from his memory bank. While the youngsters on the ranch, and that included Sammi Jo, showed cattle

and hogs they had raised from babies to earn funds for college and more, Laurel had refused. Because she could not stand to see them go off to the slaughterhouse after they had been auctioned off for that money. She refused to harm something she had raised and given her heart to.

Perhaps the slick Hollywood version of recent years had glossed over that young girl in his memories, and he'd never really given consideration to the idea that under those shiny layers, that other Laurel might be still lurking in the shadows. How that made him feel in that moment was hard to explain and surprised him at the same time. He had written her off as lost to her Texas roots. But maybe he might have misjudged. And that made him take another turn around the downtown square and pull into a parking space at the little group of food trucks on a side street.

Laurel roused from her silent regard outside her window. "What is all this? There are actually food trucks here? You are stepping up in the world?"

"We do have our moments. My stomach is telling me I need some of Teresa's Tempting Tamales. They are their own food group. Come on, city girl. I'll even treat." He shot her a grin as he unbuckled his seat belt and opened the door.

For once, she gave no argument or comeback.

"You pick out a good shady spot for us, and I'll get the food." Jaxson stepped up to the order window.

It wasn't long before he approached a waiting Laurel with a tray loaded with food with an aroma that was definitely an enticement to stop and try the fare.

"I got the mixed plate for you so you can sample not only one of Teresa's great tamales, but you have her fajita beef burrito, her frijoles, and her grandmother's rice. I got bottled water and a sweet tea, just in case you haven't totally given up the Texas

tea habit for fancy water. But you might want both once you get into some of the spicy goodness.” He sat the plate in front of her, and she slowly looked from her plate across the small picnic table to his much larger platter.

“Don’t judge. Working cowboys need a hearty meal.” He was already rolling up one of the flour tortillas and taking a bite.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She tasted the burrito first. “Wow! This is amazing. No joke. If they had this little food truck in LA, with this great tasting food, she’d have it made.”

“I’m sure she is quite happy right where she is.”

“And thanks to her and her cooking, I know where to find you when my cell phone can’t.” The speaker approached their table with a wide smile on her face, arms outstretched to slide with familiar ease around Jaxson’s waist as he hastily rose to greet her. His arms engulfed her in a welcome that caught Laurel off guard.

“Trust her to keep an eye on me. And sorry about my manners.” Jaxson lessened his hold on the woman, but she stayed at his side, her gaze falling on Laurel. “Laurel Burkitt, let me introduce Arabella Cavazos. Arabella’s aunt is the awesome Teresa who produces this great food.”

*

Jaxson’s grin was wider than Laurel had seen it in a very long time.

Arabella. The Arabella. The woman who had lured him away from their welcome-home dinner when she and Sean had first arrived. She was diminutive in comparison to Jaxson’s tall figure, but quite beautiful. Long, raven-black hair hung past her waist in a shining straight mass. She had curves that were shown off in the tight jeans she

wore, knee-high red cowboy boots, and a bright-white peasant top that set off her golden skin. Flashing black eyes were outlined by long lashes that Laurel gauged to be real, much to her chagrin.

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So, this was the woman who just might be the one to make his dream come true? Home and kids and a loving wife... Laurel's appetite was gone. But she managed to keep her responding smile on an even keel.

"It's very nice to meet you."

"Same here," the woman responded. "I will impress the children this afternoon that I have met an actual Hollywood star."

"Children? You have children?" Laurel blurted it out before she thought.

Both Arabella and Jaxson laughed, but Arabella responded first. "Yes, I have fifteen. They are my students. I teach sixth graders in the accelerated program. Also, I teach music, dance and art at the junior high. Those are the students who are aware that Burkitt's own Laurel Burkitt has won a couple of Oscars for your wonderful stories."

Beautyandbrains. Jaxson hit the jackpot. And Laurel met the green-eyed monster of jealousy without any warning. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep her voice from shouting out loud the words that were clamoring through her head. He was mine first. And just as soon as they popped into her brain, the others followed.

And you let him go. You tossed him aside. You are an idiot.

Chapter Seven

"I had hoped stopping for some of Teresa's good cooking would help brighten things a bit, given what happened earlier. I know you're hurting for that pup. But you've done

what you can do and now you just have to let whatever will happen take it from here. You gave him a fighting chance. The rest is up to the doctor and to the little guy's will to fight."

Laurel heard the tone change in his voice. Jaxson hadn't needed to care enough to go down into that ditch and culvert and then spend his time racing to a vet for a homeless, half-dead animal. But he had. She had discovered many years ago that there was actually a heart in Jaxson Hawkes's chest, and not just for his expensive horses. She had almost forgotten that. Try as she might earlier to conceal them at the vet's, she knew he had seen the tears. He could have made a big deal of it. He could have told her to get over it and then deposited her back at the ranch so he could get on with the work he had on his plate. But he hadn't. He had been human and humane. She leveled her gaze on his profile as he concentrated on the driving.

"Your secret is showing."

That got his attention. He glanced over at her. "Secret? I'm an open book. I believe you accused me of that fact, so you can't go flip-flopping."

"You use that black hat and those dark glasses to hide the fact. You come across with an exterior of being all business and ice in your veins. But that is all a sham. You have a heart buried down deep. Once in a while, you slip up and it shows. Why else would the lovely Miss Arabella have her Private Property sign showing behind the perfect smile? Play your cards right and you'll be an old married man by Christmas. I bet you."

He made a sound like a gruff old bear under his breath. His gaze was back on the road. "I wouldn't take that bet. And you just met her, so how would you know what's in her mind?"

"I'm a female. To put it in simple terms, we have a secret communication of smiles

and looks and body language that is all code for other females to get the message loud and clear. I certainly got it at the lunch table. She sees you as her property and you are off-limits. And I would say that you aren't as against that idea as you might like to pretend. Why not? She's a beautiful and somewhat sexy lady with brains."

"Wow.Sold.Although I can't help but detect a hint of a few notes of disbelief from you about what you just said. Is it so surprising that some female might take mercy on me and choose me?"

They both knew he was referring to their parting scene a few years back when she turned him down for the bright lights of Hollywood.

"If you're fishing for more compliments, forget it. I keep my quota of those to a minimum."

"Well, Arabella is indeed a smart lady, and she knows the score. She doesn't see you as competition, just someone who has that stardust sprinkled around her. Don't be surprised if she was sizing you up to find the way to get you to visit her classroom. She's all about doing whatever she can to keep her kids engaged and holding on to their dreams outside Burkitt."

That didn't help Laurel's opinion of the woman. She sounded like someone she would normally like... on another planet. The ranch came into sight. She straightened.

"Just drop me at the steps. I want to check in with Sean and with Doc about his patient. And thanks again for doing all of the things you did this morning. Sorry it took half your day, but I do appreciate it. It meant a lot. And not just about the puppy, but how you helped Sean with the horse. I was wrong to accuse you of something else. You aren't petty, and you wouldn't put a horse or human in danger." She finished the words through the open window of the truck, the door shutting between them.

“Don’t worry, I still have many hours ahead to accomplish what I need to do. And I’m glad it meant a lot. That makes it worthwhile. Go call the vet.” He put the truck in gear and pulled away.

Laurel took her time climbing the stairs. Her mind was still in the truck beside Jaxson. It had truly been a roller coaster of a day emotion-wise. And an enlightening one. Jaxson Hawkes really was a good guy.

“There you are! I have been on the phone with dozens of calls, and I needed your input. Where have you been? I left a dozen messages on your phone. From the window, I see you pull up in the company of the enigmatic foreman and I have to wonder what you two have been up to that took so long. Should I be a jealous fiancé?”

Laurel tossed a look at Sean, who stood in front of the window waiting for her. “Sorry, you won’t have to fight a duel for me. The foreman is taken by a local beauty I met today. So don’t worry. Now let’s go find something cold to drink and you can fill me in on the calls.”

Sean slid an easy arm around her shoulders as they headed toward the hall. “Don’t look so glum. You should be happy that the guy is no longer crushing on you, right? You’ve both moved on, and now we need to get a move on our list of items to get done. CeeCee will be here in the next day or so and then the clock will be ticking. Everything must be perfect.”

Laurel smiled and nodded and put her brain into business mode. But it was a lot harder to push the muscle in the center of her chest in the same direction. And the image of sitting beside him as that pickup drove off into the sunset had staked a hold inside her. For the first time, that particular cowboy had pushed all thoughts of Hollywood and movies from her brain. What had changed?

*

“Thought you had taken the day off or something,” Beaudry noted as he came across his brother inside the tack room an hour later. “Especially since the guys said they saw you on their feed store run over in Abilene in the company of two beautiful women. Something I should know about?”

“You should know that it is none of your business about the beautiful women part, especially since one of them was your engaged sister-in-law, and if I had taken the day off, I sure wouldn’t be here right now.” Jaxson kept his gaze on the list in his hands that he had been trying to reconcile for longer than he cared to admit. The last thing he needed was another interruption by his nosy brother.

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“I see. I think. But I know better than to poke the old bear while in this mood. So I’ll just remind you that we’ve got the Tremaynes coming over to look at those two mares this afternoon at four. You’re free, right? I can do it myself if you have something else you need to do. But you’re the one who began this deal, so I thought you might want to see it through.”

“I’ll be there. As long as I can get through this list without any more interruptions.”

Beaudry chuckled. “I’m leaving. Don’t need to tell me twice. See you later.”

The room was quiet again. Which suited Jaxson just fine. His whole day had been off-kilter, thanks to a certain female, and had progressed downhill from early that morning when he had the great idea of driving her over to the worksite for her project. Why had he done that? He could have—and should have—sent one of the cowhands over there as driver. Laurel’s soft heart had surprised him. He had expected it to have hardened over the years away from Texas, becoming one of the elites in moviemaking. Yet, there it was when the vet had been giving his assessment of the puppy. And he was glad it was still there.

Another memory of Laurel came back to his mind. She had been thirteen and one of the barn cats was having kittens on a cold winter’s night. It was clear that she might be having a hard time of it. Laurel’s grandmother had forbidden her from bringing the cat into the house. So Laurel had taken a pillow and blanket and bedded down in a corner of the barn, willing herself to stay awake. She’d sat there, afraid to close her eyes and afraid she wouldn’t know what to do if the cat needed help.

He had been coming back just after midnight from a stock run when he noted a small

bit of light under a blind in the feed room office. Something made him detour and check it out. There he found Laurel, trying to hide the fear and tears, but not doing a very good job. He should have gone away when she had shaken her head when he asked if she needed help. His warm bed was calling. But he stayed. And by dawn, there had been two kittens born. But Mom did not make it.

Jaxson had rummaged around in the med closet and then placed a call to the vet. He would deal with doing that later, when the bill came in. And Laurel's grandfather would try to placate her grandmother for going against her orders. But that would come later. Jaxson had made a dash into town and came back with the meds and the formula and instructions. For the next four weeks, Laurel hid the kittens away and fed them every two hours. Then he would come in from a long day's work on the ranch, sneak into the med room, and claim the items Laurel would have left for him, and he would take the night shift from midnight to just before sunrise. The cats had survived, and he had a feeling that Laurel had stepped in and shielded her grandmother's ire from him. But it had been worth it. That had also been the dawning of new feelings that led to his determination that he had found the one female that would be his person for the rest of his days.

Most people would have made a joke of the fact that a sixteen-year-old kid had made such a decision. But he knew just as certain as the sun rose in the east that Laurel Burkitt was the one. His heart had only grown in that belief. Until the day he had stepped up and taken her hand as she was about to leave the ranch again after losing her grandfather. He had spoken his heart. And she had countered, asking him to go with her. They had come to an impasse, and neither was giving in. So, Laurel had gotten on the plane and left.

It was a memory he chose to not revisit over the years. Why it had reared its head again in that moment, he couldn't explain. But it needed to be forgotten. Their lives had gone on and grown apart. And just the fact that Laurel had returned with her fiancé in tow should be the period at the end of that sentence. And if what Laurel said

earlier about Arabella and her interest in a future with him was true, well, then that was okay too. In fact, while in Dallas, away from the gossips in Burkitt, he'd shopped for a ring... just in case. He had one, but that was locked in a safe and belonged to only one woman—Laurel. His heart kept it company. More so since Laurel had come back again.

But why did Laurel's comments on the issue bother him so much? He never pretended to know what any female was thinking. But was she right? Was she saying it as some kind of warning or was she being funny or was she—

He stopped.

The thought he had in that moment was just too farfetched. Laurel Burkitt would never be a jealous woman. Why should she? She had the world by the tail and a fiancé and a future that was on fire. Why should she care about anything to do with a common cowboy's life? She had made it clear that his life was not one that she would ever find appealing. So, knock it off. She had something new to interest her, but sooner or later, it would lose its glitter and she'd be on that jet, she and Sean, back to the life that suited them. He wasn't going to go backward.

Chapter Eight

It was a good thing that not much surprised him. Most of the time. Jaxson removed his usual sunglasses and took another long look at the couple standing next to the curb in front of the diner. Sean had caught his attention when he had pulled in three spaces down to grab a quick coffee on the way back to the ranch. Jaxson had been on the road for the last eight hours and he was ready to get back home. He didn't want to have to make small talk with their guest. His hand froze on the door handle.

The door opened on the Jeep that had pulled into the parking spot in front of Sean. His face lit up when he saw the driver. A long-haired blonde fairly flew from the

driver's seat and plastered herself against his body. Sean was very clearly as engaged in the hello as the woman was. The only thing wrong in Jaxson's estimation was the fact that Laurel was nowhere in sight.

He'd write it off as welcoming his sister possibly, but that was not a hug any guy would be giving his sister. What was going on? He didn't figure Sean for a player, but then, who really knew anyone these days? By the look on Sean's face, he was definitely all into whoever the female was. Then the pair jumped into her vehicle. It was evident he had been waiting on her to appear. They pulled away from the curb and soon were headed down the road toward the ranch.

Interesting. And did Laurel know this person? Something about it didn't sit well with Jaxson. Not one little bit. Why should he care what the pair of them did? If Laurel didn't know what her fiancé was all about, it wasn't up to him to enlighten her. Or was it? Someone was going to tell him just who that woman was and what was she to Laurel's fiancé.

He shook his head. Just another headache he didn't need. The coffee was forgotten. He jammed the truck into gear and headed out of town.

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"You got back from the stock show just in time for our party. I'm glad you could make it." Sammi Jo caught up with Jaxson as he stepped out of his truck in front of the stable offices.

His sister-in-law was glowing and growing, and he was grateful for both positives. He wasn't one to be effusive about such things, but he had more than a little bit of pride in the fact that he was going to be an uncle again. Both Beaudry and Sammi Jo were still in the over-the-moon but cautious stage. So he tried to follow suit.

“What party would that be?”

“Well, we have the groundbreaking with the dignitaries who are flying and driving in to celebrate this great boon to the state’s treasury. Of course, most of these politicians are also campaigning, so there will be a lot of boring speeches and grandstanding. But the party will just be us and some of the staff who will be moving here when they get the housing done. There are already walls going up in some areas. I think these guys must be working around the clock.”

“With your sister overseeing them, would you think it would be any other way?”

Sammi Jo laughed and shook her head. “Absolutely true. But you have to be there, okay?”

“I make no promises. I need to check on some things I left for the crew to take care of while I was gone, and it’s been a long time on the road. But you can stop the pouting routine. I will try.”

“I’m not as good at the pout as my sister is. But glad you took pity on my effort. See you later.”

A party. He was bone-tired and never felt less like celebrating. He’d make the rounds and then grab a shower that might make a little difference in his energy level. If he were lucky, he’d be in and out without too much party talk involved.

He had twenty minutes. That was what his watch showed when he finished his last check-in with the night crew. If he tried to go all the way back to his house, there would be no time. He had his clothing bag still in his truck, and there was an empty shower in the second barn. Actually, it was little more than a showerhead and a square of fiberglass that left very little to the imagination if a taller cowboy was trying to take a quick scrub after an assist with the vet in the foaling area or after

some mishap. It would have to do or else he would go smelling like all sorts of foul smells to this party.

At least the water was hot, and it was working its magic on reviving his brain and cleaning the road grime off his body. The bar of soap was small and slippery. And it decided to go flying out of his hand and end up on the wet floor behind him. He turned, muttering an expletive, and bent to pick up the elusive soap. It went skittering farther away from his grasp. Another grab and he got it.

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Then he heard an unwelcome sound.

He was not alone.

“My, my. Don’t think I’ve ever been greeted by such an interesting sight before.”

But things got worse when Jaxson jerked upward and turned toward the speaker without thinking it through. Of course, the soap went flying again.

“And one so excited to see me, at that.”

A long moment stretched into what seemed a decade of speechless shock. Then Laurel began biting her lip, shoulders shaking as she concealed a laugh.

Jaxson straightened, his chin coming up in challenge. “You can keep staring, or you could hand me the bar of soap and help a guy out.”

Laurel took in a deep breath and did just that, moving a few steps forward until the partition was between the two of them. She sat the bar on top of the partition and stepped back.

“When did Laurel Burkitt run away from a dare?”

“When she stopped playing childish games and grew up.”

“I think you lost your nerve,” he challenged. “Although the best response might have been something like, ‘when I got engaged.’ But then maybe it’s hard to remember

that sometimes. For both you and Sean.”

“Looks like you might be getting cold, so I’ll just go now.”

“There’s the Laurel I knew and... love,” he added softly. But, of course, she was already out of the door. And it was good that she was gone because he had shocked himself into speechlessness. He had not only bared his body, but he had almost bared his soul too.

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“You look like you need this,” Beaudry said, handing over a cold bottle of beer. Jaxson had managed to walk into the dining room just as everyone was moving in that direction.

“Thanks, I needed this, and probably a few more.” He took a deep swig as his gaze made a sweep of the room. The person he was searching out stood across the room with Sean and, surprise, surprise, the blonde from earlier in the day. The three of them were laughing and acting like nothing was amiss.

Jaxson had time to observe the trio, particularly the woman he had just blurted out a heart-stopping admission about. She was gorgeous. Her hair was done up on top of her head in a sexy style that made his fingers itch to remove each hairpin slowly and methodically. The dress was a blue shimmery material with one shoulder covered with a ruffle and the other bare. There was a slit that, when she moved, showed off a long length of tanned leg that stirred parts of him that might need another bout under the cold showerhead if he didn’t gain some control.

“It isn’t nice to leer at my sister. Especially with her fiancé so close beside her.” Sammi Jo had sidled up next to him, her gaze watching him with a knowing smile on her face.

“I’m not leering, just admiring. And who is the blonde next to Sean? A relative?”

“That is the person who’ll help make certain the wedding goes off without a problem. She’s a wedding planner and longtime friend of theirs from Hollywood. She’s really nice. I’ll introduce you if you’d like after dinner. Her name is CeeCee. And she’s available if you’re interested, or maybe you aren’t available, since I heard that Laurel met your lady friend a few days ago in Abilene. Perhaps you’ll bring her by the ranch sometime so the rest of us could also meet her. That is a suggestion, in case you’re wondering.”

“Which I heard. Back to CeeCee—it might be interesting to meet her. How about you sit me beside her tonight?”

Sammi Jo looked almost shocked. “You’re really showing some interest in one of our female guests? After all the ones I’ve brought out to the ranch under one pretense or another? This is a major development.”

Major development? Or just a sick twist of humor? Jaxson finished his third beer and, over the course of the evening, found the new addition to the Hollywood guests was both interesting and had a sense of humor. He was also aware of the darted looks Sean sent their way during dinner. That was interesting, as was the fact that Laurel had been very careful not to show any interest in whatever he and their friend were engaging in during the evening. A fourth drink might be pushing things. He’d excuse himself and find a pot of black coffee in the kitchen. Then he’d visit some more with CeeCee once she returned from powdering her nose.

*

“So, what gives with that cowboy? Since when have tight jeans and cowboy hats been your cup of tea?”

CeeCee gave Sean a slow smile. “Since they come with such a sexy, silent, and mysterious male who wears them. I should have come to Texas a lot sooner.”

“Maybe you should have. But I choose to not waste time on that subject. Besides, then you’d have to do without those back massages I am the expert at and you love so much.”

“There is that fact,” she said. CeeCee gave him a long look of consideration. “Although you’ve been out of practice awhile. How do I know you still have the magic touch?”

Sean took hold of her hand and pulled her through the pantry door, keeping the light off, but with the door cracked a few inches, there was still plenty of light to see his target.

“I don’t think this is a good idea. Someone might come in and need something out of this pantry. How do you think we explain this?”

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“I write scenes like this. I can sell anything to anyone. I know what I want and...”

The door slid open with a decided push and the bright overhead light came on. Three people stood staring in shock at each other. It was the newcomer, cup of coffee in hand, that recovered first. Jaxson smiled. “Well, I want some flavored creamer for my coffee that is on the third shelf there behind you, Sean. If you could use your free hand to reach over and hand me the box, I’d be grateful.” He stood smiling at the pair, as if they were just discussing the weather.

“Is there something you two were looking for in here? I can probably help you out. Did I hear something about needing a massage? Are you having problems with your back, Miss CeeCee? I could recommend some horse liniment that works just as good, if not better, than anything you might find on the medicine shelf here. It might not smell like fine cologne, but it sure does the trick.”

“She doesn’t need horse liniment. Whatever would make anyone think that would work on a human?” Sean seemed genuinely incensed by such a thought. Jaxson’s response was held in check as Laurel joined the pantry party.

“I evidently did not get the message that the party had moved to the kitchen pantry.”

All gazes landed on Laurel standing just outside the doorway. “Someone want to tell me why we’re having a discussion about horse liniment? In the kitchen? Inside this small pantry?”

“Your cowboy was trying to talk CeeCee into letting him massage her with horse medicine, of all things. He owes her an apology.”

CeeCee spoke up. “Don’t be so dramatic, Sean. He did no such thing. He was being helpful when I noted that in such a cramped area, my back might need some work on it. And I think it just needs to have some room to stretch and walk it off.”

“Right this way,” Jaxson responded, offering his arm, which she took advantage of. “We can take a stroll down to the stables, and I will make you a gift of your own bottle of liniment.”

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“There he goes again.” Sean did not move from the pantry, a definite scowl on his face as the pair departed the kitchen without a look in his direction.

“Sean, calm down.” Laurel’s words were not as soft at that point. She didn’t like the way she had reacted to the sight of CeeCee taking possession of Jaxson’s arm in such a way as to make someone think they might be more than just new acquaintances. This was not how things were supposed to be turning out. She focused on the man still standing under the glaring light of the pantry.

“People have known for quite some time that horse liniment can indeed help humans’ limbs too. People who spend their lives around them know that. You can be forgiven for not being one of them. But why did you attack Jaxson so harshly? What’s up with that?”

“I think he’s hitting on CeeCee. What was I supposed to do? I can’t stand up and challenge him to a duel or something. What is it that you females seem to find so irresistible about him?”

“Don’t lump me in that female category.”

Sean shook his head, hands on hips. “I hate to break the news to you, burst that

bubble, shatter the illusion—”

“Cut to the chase.”

“You are only fooling yourself, sweetheart. And those of us who know you too well see through all the BS you are throwing around to hide one simple fact. You are into that cowboy more than you want to admit. But we have a deal, a plan, you and I, and we are not deviating from it. Not until that gold ring in my safe deposit box is on a certain finger. Admit it. And then get over it. At least until the happy-ever-after part is a done deal. Now help me find that Rodeo Romeo and get CeeCee away from him.” He didn’t wait for a response but pushed past her, vacating the pantry, moving like a man on a mission.

Laurel stood in place. He was upset. He had no idea what he was talking about. Sean didn’t know that she had turned Jaxson Hawkes down flat, tap-danced across his broken heart on her way up the steps to the plane, and left him for a life she had thought was her dream. How could things she thought were so settled before suddenly feel like they were spinning out of control and unraveling faster than she could find the solution? Jaxson Hawkes was at the root of it all.

But she had a news flash for Sean—he was wrong about her being one of the females who would fall under his cowboy charms.

She had done that long ago. Simple statement, yet it carried a mighty wallop with it. Right up the side of her head. And that’s what rooted Laurel to the spot in that moment. What she thought was in the past, she had left behind her, was standing right in front of her again in that instant. Sean was right. Those were words that often surprised her, but now they shocked her. Jaxson wasn’t playing by her rules. He was to stay the brokenhearted cowboy who would get over her one day, and she’d live happily in a charming cottage by the ocean writing movie scripts.

But then something changed, and Texas had lured her back. Texas, and the land that would make her wild plan into reality. It wasn't because of any cowboy.

Write that on the chalkboard fifty times, Laurel Burkitt.

Still wouldn't make it any more believable.

Chapter Nine

"Well, it's about time that you decide to share your Hollywood glamour self with the rest of us in this little corner of Texas." Tally Mayhew greeted Laurel with a huge smile and a hug as she and Lacy entered Coffee and a Chat next morning.

"Knock off that Hollywood stuff," Laurel returned. "I am now just a Burkitt refugee returned home again."

"Right," Tally said with an eye roll. "I suppose those designer jeans, yellow boutique top, and hand-tooled leather boots were all dropped on the doorstep of our local thrift shop, and you just happened by and picked them up. Remember who you are talking to, girlfriend. Until you arrived back here, I was considered the fashion maven around town."

Laurel grinned, sliding into the booth reserved for Tally's own little chat group, of which Laurel had been a charter member since Tally had arrived in Burkitt with her brother and mother back in high school. "I'd say you probably wear several different titles around town from what I've heard. My sister tries to keep me updated on all the news, but she falls short sometimes. But I like what you've done with the place. Are you into being a librarian now?"

"Isn't it cool?" Lacy chimed in. "My friends and I come here in the afternoons after school or meet for our own chats and iced coffees on weekends. We love the

magazines Tally brings in for the younger crowd. And she even has music that we like. It works out with the young people in Tally's on Saturdays, and the older crowd is here during the weekdays."

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“I see. Theyoungercrowd. Guess us older crowd need to form knitting circles next. You have room on the other side of the book area for us, Tally?”

Tally finished pouring the coffee and placed the pot on the warmer at the end of the counter. She slid into the booth next to Lacy and across from Laurel. “Sure. I’ll just knock out another wall on the other side of the bakery counter. Whatever my patrons request, I do my best to provide.” They all laughed.

“You are just a shrewd businesswoman. Let’s hope some of that rubs off on me and my project.”

“Spill it. I have tried to pry information out of your sister, but she clams up. And I even resorted to trying to barter baked goods if Jaxson would fess up, but he is worse than Sammi Jo. What is going on out there on the Aces High? Construction crews are moving in trailers and all sorts of equipment comes pulling through town.”

“There’s going to be an announcement at the town council this afternoon. You can be front and center and learn all about it. But I hope you and the rest of Burkitt will see what a boon this will end up being for all of you too.”

“Whatever it is that brought you home again is okay by me. I know Sammi Jo and this one here,” Tally responded, nodding at Lacy beside her. “They are over the moon at having you back in the fold. And I think our very own celebrity dropping into Coffee and a Chat now and then will bring in the crowd. I’d say I’d hire a security guy for the front door, but I think Jaxson and his scowls will keep the wrong sort out of here and away from you.”

That brought Laurel's attention to the direction of Tally's nod, and she met Jaxson's gaze across the room. The dark glasses were in place, but she could feel the silent glare. With a barely perceptible movement, he left her and went back to listening to the conversation that the other trio of ranchers were having at the table.

"I'm surprised he has time to spare to sit in a coffee shop and shoot the breeze." Okay, so maybe she couldn't resist the catty remark that came out of her. Laurel took a quick sip of coffee to keep any other words from coming forth. She might be a bit peevish since she didn't get much sleep last night. Her mind kept going along the dark path that led to the stables where Jaxson and CeeCee had disappeared when they left the pantry. Sean had not returned from following them by the time she had fallen asleep the first time. She had toyed with the idea of going into his side of the suite and waking him to find out what had happened, but that would give credence to his silly idea that she was crushing on the cowboy. She slept fitfully, blaming Jaxson for whatever he might have done.

"I saw him heading into town this morning at six. He's been doing that a lot these past few days," Lacy contributed. Then she, too, fell silent, intent on her glass of juice and banana nut muffin.

"Even that's a bit early for schoolteachers, isn't it? But then again, it's an hour's drive from here over to where the beautiful Miss Arabella works, so maybe he has breakfast there." Tally shot Laurel a shrewd look. "I see him heading by here while I'm opening in the mornings. He takes the cutoff toward the main highway, so guess he does like breakfast in Abilene."

Laurel gave a slight shrug. "That's his business. And now Lacy and I need to get a move on. We need to visit a little patient over at the vet. Be sure and be over at the meeting at three today, and you'll know what the mystery is all about."

"I suggest you go out by the back door," Tally said, standing quickly, her gaze on the

front glass door. “Twit is headed this way with her notebook in hand. She’s looking for her next gossip column.”

Laurel didn’t have to be told twice. She and Lacy were going through the kitchen door as the bells chimed over the front door. It was a narrow escape.

A few minutes later, the SUV was on its way out of Burkitt. Laurel cast a glance over to her companion in the passenger’s seat. Before she could voice the question filling her brain, her phone beeped, and she accepted the call on her earbuds.

“It’s me, Tally. Miss Melba Tweet was not happy in missing you this morning. She was definitely sniffing around for gossip.”

“I owe you. Good thing you saw her in time and we could escape. She’s called the ranch a couple of times this week, and you’d think she’d get the message that there is ‘no comment’ on anything she might ask. But she should have plenty to report on this afternoon. Thanks again for enabling our getaway.”

“That’s what friends are for! See you later.”

Laurel smiled. It was good to be home where people looked out for each other.

“So,” she said to Lacy, “I sort of got the feeling that you know more about these six-in-the-morning trips of Jaxson’s than you were letting on earlier in the diner. Is there a mystery you care to share with your favorite aunt?” She used a nonchalant, I-don’t-really-care tone... or so she hoped.

“I thought you said that washisbusiness? We shouldn’t be talking about it, right?” Lacy gave her a totally innocent-but-not-really, caught-you smile right back.

“You know, you are really more like me than I care to admit.” Laurel dropped the

subject.

However, it came right back up again once they had arrived at the vet's office and they were waiting to see the little pup who was still hanging on after the bout with the coyote.

"Here he is," Doc Andrews announced, the lab-coated assistant behind him, positioning the bundle of blue material in the center of the exam table. The little pink nose, whiskers twitching as it smelled the air around him, made Laurel feel so much better. She rubbed the furry head with a finger.

"He's getting better." She grinned. Then looked up at the vet for a nod of affirmation. There was a sigh of relief when he gave that nod.

"Slowly, but surely. This one is a tough little nut. But a good patient. He takes his meds, eats, and drinks, and then gives us urine and stools... then lets us poke him with sharp things he doesn't care for but seems to know that he needs in order to break free of this place."

"I knew he just needed a chance to make it. I can't thank you enough for all that you're doing for him. As I said that day we brought him in, he's my responsibility. I'm paying his bill, and whatever you think he needs, then he should have it."

"Well, he's going to make it, and that's the biggest thanks. But you and Jaxson have a big part of it. The way you two have managed to drive over here and visit him means a lot to a patient, be it human or animal. It helps in their recovery."

Laurel must have misheard the man. "Jaxson? He's come by since we dropped him off the first day?"

"Yes, indeed," the vet responded, "much to my surprise. I've never known Jaxson to

be a small animal type of person, much less to take time from the Aces High to concern himself with tending to sick animals. But each morning, he's here bright and early as the morning crew is changing over and they let him in for a few minutes. Then off he goes back to the ranch. That's a bit of a drive, but he's done it. Except, there is one thing that I might have done wrong here."

"Wrong?"

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The man cast a sheepish look in her direction. “I was sort of sworn to secrecy about his visits. But you’ll keep this between you and Lacy and I... agreed?”

“I think we can handle that. Right, Lacy?” She looked at her niece and her suspicion was confirmed. Lacy couldn’t hide the guilty look quickly enough. Yep, they would have a discussion on the way home.

“When does this little one get to come home?”

“Well, as I told Jaxson this morning, I think as long as he has someone to handle his meds on the schedule he needs and he continues to eat the prescribed diet, then I will probably release him in a couple more days. But I was under the impression that Jaxson would be picking him up. Or are you the designated new owner? And, by the way, have you a name for this little orphan?”

“Jaxson thinks he is taking control of this puppy?” Laurel had other ideas about that one. “The person who names him is the owner, and I am doing that. His name is Lucky. It had to be pure luck we came across him when we did.”

“Well,” the assistant spoke for the first time, “I did hear Mr. Hawkes refer to him just this morning as Little Duke.”

“Hmmm, seems we have a naming battle about to be had. I think we’ll return this little John Doe to his quiet cage and let the humans settle this one on their own.” Doc Andrews nodded for the assistant to take the puppy bundle out of the room. “If all stays on track, one of you can pick him up on Monday morning. Have a good day, ladies!”

Laurel waited until they were on the highway, headed back to Burkitt. “You knew that Jaxson was coming to Abilene to see the pup each morning, didn’t you?”

“I might have made a promise, so I am pleading the Fifth.”

“Hmmm, so he’s corrupted you. Well, if he thinks he’s going to name him some ridiculous name as Little Duke... It was my idea to save him in the first place, so he’s mine to name.”

“But didn’t Uncle Jax do the actual saving of going into the awful drain pipe and getting him before the coyote could return?”

Laurel gave another sidelong glance. “And your point is? He wouldn’t have done that if I hadn’t made him. But make no mistake, we shall settle this.”

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The crowd that assembled for the big news that afternoon was too large for the usual town council meeting chamber, so they moved it all to the outside of the courthouse, with the podium and main speakers positioned on the steps so all could see them. The press agents had done their due diligence and the major stations were represented from as far away as Dallas and San Antonio, with national feeds to both coasts. Radio and print also were represented. And that included Melba Tweet, positioned front and center.

The Aces High was represented by both Sammi Jo and Laurel, Sean, the mayor, and the sheriff. The prominent business leaders were lined up behind them. The front row held the home team—Beaudry, Jaxson, Lacy, Tally, CeeCee, and other friends. The mayor made a welcome on behalf of the town council and then made the announcement of the new business that would soon be bringing more notoriety and funds to their area. Clapping grew into a wave of heartfelt applause.

Laurel and Sean fielded the multitude of questions from the media with cool, calm assurance and smiled and did their best celebrity imitations. That was the part Laurel had found had lost its shine for her after the first year or two in Hollywood. Behind the scenes was much more to her liking, so she was quite happy to let Sean do the bulk of the celebrity nonsense.

But she studiously ignored Jaxson. She was growing even more miffed at him for daring to think he could step in and take ownership of the puppy. When had he ever shown an interest in an animal except for its value to working on the ranch? She'd set him straight.

She was about to step off the stage at the end of the press conference and do just that when she noticed that Arabella had latched onto Jaxson's arm and was drawing him away from the crowd. What did she think she was doing in Burkitt? The image of placing a drawbridge across the road leading between Burkitt and Abilene flashed through Laurel's brain for a moment. Then she dismissed it because that might be a bit too much, although her grandmother might have agreed to such a plan if she were still with them.

But that was set aside when she saw the Twit sidled up next to CeeCee, her tape recorder in one hand and her look of salacious glee apparent. And CeeCee was a novice. But Laurel knew that once Melba found a loose thread, she would work it until it was totally unraveled and exposed. She was about to jump into the breach when Beaudry stepped forward and basically led CeeCee away from the situation with a brief word and tip of his hat to Melba. It was clear the woman didn't care for the interruption. Bless Beaudry!

"Turn that upside-down smile right side up," Dawson said, stepping up and giving Laurel a hug. "Welcome back to stay among us privileged few again. I bet my brother, Tucker, you'd be back one day for good, and he just lost fifty big ones to me. So, thanks there, sweet lady. Come by anytime, and I'll buy you a sweet tea, or

something stronger, if needed.” They both laughed.

“Wow, so you are really going to do it this time—stay home in Burkitt and not fly off?” Tally had joined them.

“Be careful of bets on that one,” a deep voice said.

Jaxson.

Laurel clamped her mouth shut before the retort could fly out.

“The roar of those jet engines could be heard at any time.”

She took a deep breath, fixed a paparazzi-loathing smile on her face, and slowly turned to face the vile man who had joined their group again, sans the woman who had lured him away. “Isn’t he so amusing, our Jaxson? But he just hates to be proved wrong. Pardon me, but he and I do have some very important business to discuss.”

This time, it was her hand on his arm that drew him away from the crowd, but not in a sweet-girlfriend kind of way. She hoped he was feeling the grip of intent through the chambray material of his gray work shirt as he allowed her to steer them away, out of earshot, and then around the corner of the huge building, out of camera shot.

She dropped the arm and the smile as she faced him.

“You know, this brings back memories. Seems we stood here once before... was it your last trip here? The high-noon showdown, as you called it, between my brother and your sister? Funny how things repeat themselves, isn’t it?”

“There is nothing funny about this. There is only one comparison between the two events—it happened here at the courthouse. But there will be no happy cheers, no

congratulations.”

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“No kisses either? I remember there were kisses involved in Beaudry and Sammi Jo’s high noon.”

“Absolutely never any kisses. Glad you find this so amusing.”

“Well, that’s not amusing at all. And you know that sounds like a challenge. It might be interesting to see just how solid thatneveris in that statement—when you aren’t in one of your prissy moods.”

That does it. Fire had to have been blazing from her eyes, because she could feel the heat boiling upward inside her. The heat of anger, not anything else!

“Leave my moods out of this. This is about the fact that you have been going behind my back, sneaking over to see the puppy, letting people think you’re the one in charge of him, and even giving him a silly name. Little Duke. What kind of name is that for him? I am the owner, so I get to name him.”

“This is about the puppy?” Jaxson seemed to have finally caught up with the subject at hand. Why did she sense there was some humor he found in it when she was dead serious?

“Do you find this funny?”

“I find this whole subject silly. No one ‘snuck’ anyplace. Last I looked, this was a free country, where I can drive anyplace at any time I choose to do so in my truck. And since I was involved in his rescue, I had every right to check on his care if I wanted to, without checking in or getting permission fromyou.”

But he wasn't finished.

“And while on the subject, you hadn't bothered to name the animal, and I was asked about it, so I chose a strong name for the little pup who went through a lot and survived. I named him after Duke Wayne—you should know him, a huge celebrity from the movies and all.”

That threw her off a bit, but not enough. “Yes, I know who John Wayne is. He is a legend and what cowboys wish they were. Don't we all wish that? But we have to get along with just regular guys in cowboy hats. Although one thing about John Wayne—he looked a person in the eyes without hiding behind any sunglasses.”

A couple of moments of silence followed. Maybe a bit too far, Laurel. She watched as Jaxson removed his glasses, folded them slowly, and then slid them inside his leather vest pocket. And she shouldn't have mentioned the glasses, because when Jaxson hit you with those incredible emerald-green eyes framed by dark lashes, it made most females take a breath or two to remember what they were saying or doing.

And her brain blanked.

“That better, princess? Do I need to repeat what I just said to have you hear it? What name do you think the pup needs? And just who do you think will take care of that dog when you head to the bright lights again? When the sun becomes too blazing hot, the sandstorms kick up, and you can't see the end of your nose? When the cold is mind-numbing or the rain won't stop for days? All those things you named when you left Texas the first time. All the things you wanted to leave behind. You'll leave him behind too.”

“I named you too. The list of things I wouldn't miss. You left out that part.”

He gave a derisive shrug. “So I did. What name did you choose?” He changed the

subject fast enough to make her have to switch gears and appear confused.

“I... it was... it’s not definite yet. But you just know that I am staying here and that puppy is coming home with me.”

“What home?”

That stopped her just as she was about to turn and walk away.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Where exactly is your home? The main house on Aces High? One of those condos they’re going to put up on your site, if the weather doesn’t throw them more off schedule? That’ll be another few months. Or do you have something else in mind? Maybe Sean will let him share his apartment in the house.”

“Hey, you two, my wife is hungry, and I’ve been sent to round you up and get you moving. Now.” Beaudry appeared, and Laurel was grateful for the appearance of that particular Hawkes brother.

“Sorry, I just needed to set something straight with your brother. All is good now. I’m starving too. I’ll beat you both back to the cars.” She didn’t wait to hear anything from them.

Chapter Ten

“I trusted you both, and both of you just left me out in the cold.” Matt Matteo sat his plate of food on the table. Its mounds of barbequed ribs, brisket, and sausage, along with sides of potato salad and pinto beans, were ready to do battle with his appetite. A cold bottle of cerveza filled the empty space next to his seat at the long picnic table. “Remind me to do that next time you have a legal problem that needs my immediate

attention.”

“What are you mumbling about?” Jaxson was finishing off the bowl of cherry cobbler in front of him. Beaudry, not one to let words interrupt his appetite, kept eating.

“Neither of you told me about the blonde from Hollywood by the name of CeeCee Lane. That she was here in our town and single and a knockout.”

“Sorry about that. Guess it slipped our minds, what with running a few hundred thousand acres and watching out for fires and empty water holes and the like. Beaudry, from now on, you need to do a better job of keeping an eye out for females and reporting them to our pal here.” Jaxson flashed a not-too-sorry grin at the attorney.

“I’d get right on that one, but since my wife might not think too highly of that idea, I’ll leave single females up to you to handle. Looked like you had things well in hand taking the lady for a walk to the stables after dinner the other night.”

“I see how it is. Jax, my old buddy here, is saving the best for himself.”

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“The best of what? Is there food I’ve missed from that huge buffet the Tremaynes have laid out this year?” Sammi Jo slid onto the bench seat next to her husband, her salad and bottle of water in hand.

Jaxson raised his eyebrows as he eyed her plate. “I’d say that your eyesight went bad on you if that salad was all you found over there.”

“My wife is being very good and following the obstetrician’s orders to the letter. I am proud of you, sweetheart.” Beaudry planted a swift kiss on her forehead as he rose from his seat.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“I need another bowl of the homemade peach ice cream. I couldn’t decide if I really liked it until I finished the first bowl. Be right back.”

Matt and Jaxson shook their heads. “If I ate like he does, I’d be the size of a barn,” Matt observed, buttering one of the rolls on his plate.

“Yes, I can see you have great restraint,” Jaxson remarked dryly.

“Is this a private party?”

CeeCee was standing at the side of the table, a plate held in her hands, and a wide smile on her face. Her short jean shorts showed off tan legs that went on and on. The tank top was an explosion of colors and left a lot of skin bare. Neither he nor Matt could get to their feet fast enough.

“Where are my manners? Please, sit here.” Matt smiled and Jaxson reached for the glass of tea she was balancing in one hand. “Since neither of the Hawkes brothers thought to introduce us before now, I am Matt Matteo, and very pleased to meet you.”

“You rest yourself right here. This spot’s been waiting for you,” Jaxson spoke up, a smile of welcome on his face.

“I find Western men so handsome and such gentlemen.” She laughed. “I’m so glad I’ll be spending a lot of time here once everything gets built.”

“Well, we have a spot for you at another table where we can talk business while we eat. Sorry, gentlemen, but Miss CeeCee here is on the clock.” Sean didn’t look a bit sorry. He picked up her glass and took her plate from her. He just gave them one of his uppity smiles, as Jaxson had christened them in his mind.

“I’m sorry. Maybe for dessert later!” She shot the words over her shoulder with a contrite smile.

“Easy come, easy go. Story of your life, Jaxson.” Matt sat down again.

“Me? What about you? You got shot down too.”

“Yes, but I have hopes of having that dessert with her. You, my friend, will probably be looking after a sick cow or something. But don’t worry. I can handle the job.”

“I think I’m losing my appetite,” Sammi Jo observed dryly, setting her fork down on her plate.

“I heard that.” Laurel had approached their table. “Are you feeling okay? Should you be out in this heat so long? Maybe getting into the shade, sitting in the cool water of the pool for a while?”

“Are you insane?” Sammi Jo replied with a firm shake of her head. “I am not getting into any pool nor showing any swimsuit on this body I have right now. No thanks.”

“I beg to differ.” Matt set his fork down and gave her a sincere smile. “I think a woman is at her most beautiful when she is bringing life into this world. Your beauty and strength know no bounds, and you are your most perfect goddess self during this time.”

“Wow, you lawyers really know how to argue a case.” Laurel grinned. “But I think you should listen to him, sis, and let’s head toward the pool.”

Sammi Jo stood and went around the table, bending to whisper something in Matt’s ear that caused him to laugh out loud. Then she gave him a peck on his cheek and joined Laurel on the path to the pool.

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Sammi Jo didend up taking off the sundress she had worn over her swimsuit. She and Laurel found a quiet seat in the shallower end of the big pool where tree branches provided a good deal of shade. Most of the children present were being entertained with the volleyball game a distance away in the water while older ones were engaged in the diving contest in the deep end.

“I had forgotten how much fun it is at these annual parties that the Tremaynes throw each year. So much good food, fun, music, just so much of everything.”

Sammi Jo smiled. “I’m glad you are enjoying it again. I hope it’s a sign that you have forgiven poor Jaxson for whatever it is you’re holding over his head these days.”

“Don’t worry about it. You know we just don’t get along. It’s not a big deal to concern yourself about.”

“I heard this is something about naming the dog that you both saved last week. Seriously? How can that be so monumental?”

“Jaxson just gets so full of himself and then does whatever he pleases. That pup is coming home with me. And I have the right to name it.”

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“Jaxson did crawl inside that awful place, I heard. What if he had found something alive that could have bitten him? He knew there was that chance and went in, anyway. I’m thinking that is because you were probably in tears and he didn’t want you to be so upset. And the fact that, whether you want to believe it or not, the man does have a heart inside that chest that I have seen as pretty darn big now and then. I think this is just another thing you want to hold up between the two of you and the fact you don’t want to see his positives.”

Laurel shook her head and contemplated leaving the water. “Don’t you go preaching the great points about the man. And lecturing me on them.”

“He didn’t have to drive to Abilene and check on the pup. He could have called or had someone do it for him. He got up a whole hour earlier in a day that is already too long, but he did it because it was important to you that the pup survive. He made sure the vet knew that no matter what was needed, he was to do it. But no one needed to share that with you. I overheard his phone conversation in the office. So, seems to me that if he wants to give the little one a good name, that’s the least you can allow for his role in saving him.”

“Jaxson thinks he needs to keep the pup because he says I am going to get on a plane and abandon him. He was willing to bet on it... a realbet. He won’t believe me.”

“Hmmm, I can certainly see that point too. How many times have we had to say goodbye to you after begging you to not go? But you did leave each time. Maybe it’s a defense mechanism for him. He watched you leave one too many times. You told him you weren’t interested and he should move on. And now he seems to have finally gotten that message. He can protect his feelings with the rest of us. I’m just saying

you can be super-stubborn at times, and that often has gotten you into deep water before you admitted it. Give the guy a break. You're building your dream here and you're going to be a bride in the very near future, so lighten up and be nicer to the man. You both are godparents to this little one I'm carrying, and I need you to form a solid front to watch over him or her if we can't. Got it?"

A lot of what her sister said was true. Laurel was stubborn, and she owned that. Sammi Jo was right about more than one thing. She could live with the name of the pup. She should be happy that Jaxson had been willing to stop and do what he did to save the dog, to give it a chance to survive. Who was she to say that he had no right to those things? And why did she act like such a shrew?

She couldn't blame him for giving her a wide berth. She hadn't given him any reason to trust otherwise. He hadn't seen what she had carved out career-wise for herself. How hard it was to be an outsider and a female daring to show the big boys at the studios she could come to their table and actually do better than many of them could. Sean had put his career and reputation on the line more than once in the beginning of their friendship to help open the doors wider for her, and she owed him for that. She and CeeCee had commiserated with each other for many hours over their dreams and failures until they were able to see their tenacity began to turn those tables. They were a mini-support system that got them all through rough times.

As for Jaxson, she came home less often, but when she did, they always seemed to take up where they left off, sparring and not seeing eye to eye on many things. But why had things changed? Why did it matter so much that he had moved on with a person like Arabella or could have an interest in CeeCee? Maybe he had gotten her message finally and shouldn't she be glad about that? Perhaps he had his fill of being treated in such a way by her? Maybe it was because he was that decent guy that everyone sang his praises about, and he was respecting her wishes. Respecting the fact that she had come home with a fiancé in tow.

What would she have him do? Fight for her? He had fought. And that was a glaring fact that hit her full force. For years, he had done everything but beg her to stay. Jaxson wasn't a man to beg for anything. But he had spoken up and put his heart on the line, and she had brushed it away. By coming home without warning and announcing her plans, then participating in a fake wedding scenario to make a special moment for CeeCee and Sean, she had turned it into a bittersweet one for her family and even worse for Jaxson.

Laurel took the blinders off. She had made a real mess of everything. What was she to do next?

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"Dogs are not my thing, sweetheart. I think I'm even allergic to them." Sean shook his head as he stood in the hallway the next morning. They had finished breakfast, and Laurel was excited because the vet had called and left word that the pup was ready to be released that day. She had told Sean that they needed to make a slight detour to pick up the new member of the family.

"This is news to me. I remember you did just fine with Anna Stroble's three corgis when you were trying to lure her into signing on to your last movie. They stayed in your condo, living the life, for six weeks. Of course, then she turned you down for that sci-fi flick. Didn't notice your allergies then."

"They're new after such an experience, and why are you taking on a mongrel? Why not one of those cute little designer dogs everyone's saying is the rage? Who is going to take care of it while you're busy on our project?"

"I am. People bring their kids to work with them, and some do the same with their pets. I will teach him to be my shadow, and he won't be any bother at all. But I need to go pick him up and grab things he needs, like food and a bed and collar."

“Good luck. I will be in our makeshift office with CeeCee and the contractors. We’ll expect you after you finish playing out your motherly instincts. Don’t forget to get several hair and lint brushes for that dog’s hair to keep it off things.” That was his parting shot.

Laurel had run out of possible people to go along. Lacy was volunteering at a day camp for children with disabilities, Sammi Jo was tied up with mounds of tax paperwork getting ready for a meeting with her accountants, and that had left Sean. Why did she need anyone? She was used to handling things on her own, so this would be no different. Grabbing her keys to Sammi Jo’s SUV and a straw hat, she headed out.

When the vet walked into the room with the squirming pup, she couldn’t believe the change. They had obviously cleaned up his fur and now she could see that he was a patchwork of browns and grays and blacks, with some white thrown in for good measure. The whiskers looked even longer. And one ear stood in perfect erection while the other one preferred to be in a perpetual droop. His stub of a tail was just that—a stub of short white hair.

“Aren’t you something? You are so handsome!” The vet transferred him into her arms, and it was as if a light switch had been turned on. He was a squirming, shaking live wire. The bright pink tongue was reaching upward to land wet licks on Laurel’s chin, causing her to laugh and fall even more in love with the pup.

“I admit I had little hope for his survival, but he has a lot of spunk and determination to survive. And he is one lucky little guy having a great chance at a good forever home now.”

Laurel thanked the man and they walked to the front desk. The receptionist handed over the necessary tags Laurel would put on the new collar she would pick up after Lacy came home and could watch the pup long enough for her to run into Burkitt and

buy the necessities.

The day was sunny, but it hadn't heated to unbearable yet and there was a steady wind, so Laurel rolled down the windows on the truck and turned on a country station. The pup joined her in the vocals on the Shania Twain tune, followed by Miranda Lambert. Neither of them was going to make a career of it in the music world, but that didn't matter. Laurel caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror.

Was that her? Her hair had grown a bit longer, it wasn't perfectly coifed into its usually sleek bob, and her makeup was just a light dusting with pale-coral lipstick. Cowgirl boots with entwined yellow roses on their shafts, jeans, a white gauze shirt over a camisole with her chunky gold ear loops, and she looked like a country girl. Well, as country as she was probably going to get at this point. And she liked it.

She liked it all—the landscape, the small-town atmosphere with its interesting and often eclectic mix of good people who made sure to let her know they were glad she had come home. And they hoped she'd stay, but it was a theme even with them. Granted, they didn't put it in the same way Jaxson did, but they had doubts, and she couldn't blame them.

But she would prove to all of them that she had tossed her last suitcase on that jet, unless she needed to fly back to pick up another one of those little gold dudes—that would be an exception. She smiled at that. There was a challenge ahead, so many unknown variables to success, but she thrived on those. And that kept the smile on her face as she pulled up in front of the house and lifted her new friend out. As they approached the porch steps, she slowed until she came to a full stop.

On the bottom step was a wicker basket. It had a big blue bow with white paw prints stamped along the ribbons. There was another ribbon with the words, Welcome home, Lucky. She was confused. Only she and Lacy knew what she had decided was the

best name for the pup. She didn't think Lacy would have had time to make something like this happen.

Laurel knelt down. "Let's see what all you have gotten. It's quite a haul, little one. You have a cool blue leather collar and a matching walking leash. Hairbrush, shampoo, a blanket, and some treats."

"I figured the wicker basket would be a good bed for him until he got a bit bigger and you'd probably want to pick out a bigger, better bed for him. Unless he can use his charms and con his way into sharing your bed. I think he's smart enough to figure out how to do that."

Jaxson had materialized in his usual stealthy manner. For some reason, her pulse decided to do jumping jacks, and she tried to use a couple of deep breaths to gain control as she stood.

"You did this? How did you know I was keeping that name? I was thinking about the one you chose, and maybe it was better and—" Jaxson raised his palm, stopping her. Why did she have to ramble in front of him?

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“The name suits him. He is one amazingly lucky little guy.”

He smiled then, and it curled her toes. She responded the same. What was going on?

Chapter Eleven

“I got a text from Lacy. She’s going to be running late from her job and wanted to know if I could somehow at least grab a collar so the pup could have something to put his tags on. She called him Lucky. So his name is settled and fits the little mutt. Take a breath and let it go.”

“There’s a lot more things in that basket than just a collar.”

“Let it go, Laurel. New babies get gifts when they arrive home, don’t they? Just make sure he gets trained and that includes how to behave around the other animals on this ranch. I don’t want to see him in the stables until he learns. That keeps the horses safe and him too.”

She held up her hand in a pledge. “I swear he will be on his best behavior.”

“We’ll see,” he replied. He went to turn away, but then stopped and turned back. “CeeCee—how long have you known her?”

“I met her right after I arrived in Hollywood the first time. She was working as an assistant at the event company the studio hired for a lot of their parties and openings. We began chatting and then met for brunch when we had free time, and a friendship developed. We ended up sharing a condo the last year. Why? Guess she made quite

an impression on you. Does that mean Arabella has some competition? She might not like that.”

“What about Sean? How long has he known her?”

Laurel was getting an odd feeling. The last thing they needed was anyone, particularly someone as clever as Jaxson, getting wind of their plan. “What is this all about? Sean and CeeCee are good friends... all three of us are and have been for a long time now. You might say we formed a semi-family unit in Hollywood. We supported each other’s dreams.”

“Just trying to get a clearer picture of who these new faces are on the Aces High. There’s going to be quite a bit of activity here and in town the next few months, bringing this plan of yours into being and all. We have a lot of high-strung, very expensive stock on this land and in these stables. I need to keep them all safe and sound. That includes the two-legged people around them as well.”

“You’ve been taking care of this ranch and the animals and people as long as I can remember. Don’t you ever take a day off from it? Have a regular life? My advice—get married and have kids and go fishing once in a while. It would make you much more pleasant.” Why did she say all of that?

“As you also told me on more than one occasion, this place is my life, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I take that very seriously. I promised your grandfather I would do that when he knew he had little time left. Guess it’s in my DNA, just like you accused me.”

He was using some of the same words she had used over the many times they had parted beside the plane. How could she explain why she’d done that when she didn’t understand it herself? But she knew with clarity that she had been wrong to do it. She had been on her high horse. And she was wrong. Being a cowboy didn’t make him

less of anything. In many ways, it made him superior to most.

“What did you promise my grandfather?”

“That I would spend my life protecting the Aces High and those he loved—your grandmother, Sammi Jo, and you. I gave my word, and that means more than any of your Hollywood contracts ever could. Does that sound like a line from an old Western?”

“In a way, it does. But it isn’t a line in a movie, yet it reminds me of your movie icon. It’s something he embodied. That’s what you do also, but in reality, and in this century. I’d say that you deserve a lot of thanks from my family and me. I know I’ve been remiss in saying that to you. But it’s time... past time. I’m sorry it took me so long. But I do appreciate you basically giving your life to this ranch. At what expense? That’s why I ask when are you going to give that same attention to your own life?”

“Maybe I’ve already begun. You gave me some advice last time you left, so maybe I’m finally taking care of that. We’ll see. Now I’ve got work to do. Can’t stand around here passing time talking to a lady, no matter how lovely she might be.” He touched a finger to the brim of his cowboy hat and then walked away toward the stables and his next project.

Laurel had to smile. He might have added a bit of the special saunter that the Duke was known for in his movies, just to put a smile out there. “You might need to practice that swagger a lot more, cowboy.” She sent the words his way on a laughing tease. It earned her thumbs-up while he just kept walking away.

“Jaxson Hawkes is one complicated man with lots of layers, Lucky. It’s going to take a woman with a lot of patience to tame him down.” Tame? Was that the word to use? How did one lasso a Texas tornado and then hang on for the ride of your life? And

why was she thinking about that at all?

*

“There’s something brewing. My old football injury is acting up like crazy. The air’s heavy, so you can’t get a good breath. Haven’t seen this in a long time.” Beaudry swept the hat off his head, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the sleeve of his work shirt as he gave his weather forecast.

“Old football injury?” Jaxson was swinging a bale of hay into the back of the feed truck just inside the shade of the barn. “You mean that knee you hit when you fell over the bench you had been warming for half a season?”

“It counts whether it happened on the field or on the sidelines, Mr. Know-it-all.”

“Well, you can load those last two bales in here while I grab my shirt and a bottle of water.” He jumped down from the tailgate.

“By the way, just want you to know that there’s a betting pool going on with some people around here. Ones with too much time on their hands.”

Jaxson shrugged into the shirt but didn’t button it, leaving a way for air to get to his heated skin. His hat was pushed back from his forehead. “I’m going to regret this, but go ahead and tell me what the bet is all about.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger, brother. You had dessert last evening with Miss CeeCee, and then stayed busy on the dance floor with Arabella. It was noticed. So the bets are on which one you will choose.”

“People need to get a life and get busy like the rest of us. I suppose you led the way with the first bet? Which one did you put your money on?”

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Beaudry landed the last bale onto the back of the truck with a loud grunt and a thud. He turned to look at Jaxson and waited for the response. There was a small, secretive grin on Beaudry's face. "I don't think either one will be the chosen. I saved my money."

"Well, that's surprising. But you always said I'd be a confirmed bachelor, so it figures."

"Oh, I don't think you'll be a bachelor. I just don't believe the lady who has you wrapped up like a Thanksgiving turkey has her name in the betting pool. So, no reason to throw away my money."

Jaxson leveled a cool gaze on his sibling across the back of the truck. "I'm not going to even ask, and you're way off base."

"Remember who you're talking to. I watched you be a lovesick calf in your teens since the first moment you saw Laurel Burkitt climb up and sit on that corral fence while you were trying to break that mustang. And I recall the impression you made on her too."

"I remember getting the hell stomped out of me after I landed in a pile of fresh manure."

"Yep, there was that. But there was just something about the way you looked up with that dark smear across your forehead and locked eyes with her. Then she made that face and burst out laughing. That was the moment I knew she was going to be special."

“You are so full of—”

Cell phone ringing cut off Jaxson’s comment. They both reached for their phones and read the message coming across each of them. It was the automatic weather system update.

“Yep, whose knee was correct? There is a front coming in from Colorado and gaining speed. It’s pushing a squall line ahead of it. Better get moving. I’ll handle things here and get the others out to their areas to do the same.” Beaudry was all business.

“On my way,” Jaxson responded, already swinging into the driver’s seat and revving the engine into gear.

The road was dirt and rutted, and Jaxson tried to pick up some speed when he could. His brother’s words running through his brain didn’t help his mood, his grip tightening on the steering wheel.

Beaudry didn’t need to stir up memories from the past where Laurel was concerned. Jaxson had more than enough of them over the years. Mostly, they left him feeling like a prized fool. It was a feeling he only knew when she came around. Then she’d fly off and he’d get his head straight again... until the next visit. Now she wasn’t leaving... or so she said. What would that daily interaction look like? Watching her and Sean marry and settle into their lives on the Aces High—and that was where his thought process would stop, like hitting a brick wall.

The thought of her with a man like Sean didn’t sit well. He didn’t trust him. There was something between him and CeeCee. Jaxson’s gut had told him that from almost the first day. He figured if he could stay close enough to the woman, he might find the key. And Laurel was a smart lady. Why didn’t she sense it? Or did she and she chose not to notice or maybe not to care? Why should he care?

Because you do. You always have, and you always will.

*

“I’ve got to get to the airport. I don’t have time for this. Why can’t we call someone? There are a hundred cowboys around until you need one.” Sean’s words had echoed in her mind more than once. A ranch full of people except when you needed one. She could agree with that. But Laurel was moving into action because the low line of clouds headed in their direction was picking up speed. Sean needed to get to the airfield, get on the plane that was waiting to take him to a connecting flight in Lubbock. But the clock was ticking before the weather shut things down, and then Sean would be a basket case. The moment he had seen the flat tire that had stopped them on the side of the road, he was pacing back and forth, trying to find a spot for cell reception with no luck, and then launching into loud tirades about the plus side of being in California, where there was civilization, as opposed to the middle of nowhere.

Laurel had set about removing the spare tire from the undercarriage of the SUV. The gravel of the road cut into her back as she tried to position herself so she could see how the tire was attached.

“Why are you under there? What do you think you can do?” Sean stopped his pacing to note the fact she had placed herself in such a position.

“At least I’m trying to do something about changing the tire so we can get moving again. Make yourself useful. Look in the back of the vehicle and hand me the tire iron or lug wrench.”

“The what? What does it look like? Does it say tire iron on it?” She could hear him rummaging around in the tool chest and muttering his displeasure. They weren’t getting anywhere. She eased herself over the rocky bed and then raised up.

“Let me look, Sean. Why don’t you go sit in the truck and let me get this done so we can get back on the road?”

He stopped and then became animated. “It’s about time! We’re saved. We can grab a ride with this person in the truck.”

Laurel turned as the vehicle slowed and pulled up beside them. The driver draped his arm over the open window bottom and flashed a smile. Her heart sunk. Of course, it had to be Jaxson.

“You really would do better with a round tire on that truck. They tend to move best that way.”

Sean’s smile had faded when he recognized their savior. “I need to get to the plane that’s waiting, and we don’t have time for rotten jokes.”

Laurel bit back her reply. It wouldn’t do any good to make matters worse. A rule of thumb on the ranch was that you didn’t push your luck, and certainly you didn’t tease or poke a rattler with that look in their eyes. It would never end well for you. And Sean was about to see Jaxson’s venom. She stepped away from the back of the SUV, having come up empty-handed in her search for the necessary tool.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Then added ten more for good measure.

“If you can lend us a tire iron, I can get this changed out.”

Jaxson had already exited his truck and was surveying the flat. “No can do.”

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“What happened to the neighborly thing and all that?” Sean was not at his best.

“I don’t have a tire iron that will fit that tire. That is one issue. The other is, had you checked out your spare situation before you took off in this particular vehicle, you would have seen the spare has had a hole punched into the side. Probably some ranch hand ran over a sharp rock and did the damage and either had no idea or was in too much of a rush to handle the problem. Either way, you won’t be changing this tire. We’ll send someone out to hook it up and get it back to the garage.”

“In the meantime, what do we do? I can’t miss my connecting flight.”

“So you’ve said. You’ll both get in the truck, and I’ll drop you at the landing strip.” He glanced at Laurel. “You’ll have to come along while I deliver this hay over to the west camp and unload it. Sorry if you were in a hurry too.”

“Well, let’s get a move on, then.” Sean grabbed his bags from the back, and Laurel stepped up and shut the tailgate after he had done so.

Just great. Stuck with Jaxson and no other option. Her steps were slower than Sean’s. At least, he held the door open for her while tapping his foot in agitation at her slower pace.

The seating arrangements weren’t the best. Since she was smaller than Sean, she ended up on the small console top perched between the two men in the front seat. There was no back seat in the older model truck used primarily for feed and other daily chores. Laurel was acutely aware of her left arm and shoulder being much too close to the foreman’s heated flesh. As they started off, she did her best to anchor

herself with a precarious hold on the side of Sean's seat and keep her feet and knees situated with enough space that Jaxson could reach between them to shift gears in the older standard engine. But it left Laurel acutely attuned to her vulnerability. The rutted road and Jaxson's increased speed made matters worse.

Is he doing it on purpose, sensing her discomfort? Figures.

Had the day grown hotter? Laurel felt a river of sweat beginning to traverse down the center of her back. She didn't remember there being so many corners on the dirt road that needed them to slow and then speed up and Jaxson having to move his hand to the lever of the gear shift more often than she would have liked. The heat of his skin seemed to seep through the cloth fabric of her jeans and his shoulder brushed along hers so that she felt the flex of his muscles from her shoulder downward. Her muscles were becoming tight as she tried to hold her body in check, but her brain was another matter. Another heat had begun to pool lower down in her midsection and beyond when Jaxson had stepped out of his truck to see what their problem was.

In the temperature of the afternoon, ninety-four and climbing, he was sans his usual work shirt in favor of the sleeveless navy tank now molded like a second skin to his body, and she jerked her gaze away from the hard muscles of his arms and flat stomach when he glanced over at her, catching her staring. There was a slight upturn of his mouth as he noted it.

"This is an antique," Sean remarked. It was clear he was not amused with their mode of transport. But he should just be thankful they weren't still stuck on the side of the road. Laurel had more reason to be displeased.

"Can't you all afford better vehicles? I've seen plenty of newer trucks around the stables. The foreman should certainly have better than this."

"It runs. It gets the minor jobs done we have need of it to do. We don't toss away

things just because they aren't shiny and new. This is a tough old girl, and she's got a lot more miles left in her."

"Finally!" The airstrip came into view, and Sean had his door open just as Jaxson slid the truck into park.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye properly to your fiancé?" Jaxson's words crashed into thoughts that needed to be stopped. Laurel hastily slid off her perch, glad to be free of the close confines and the cowboy beside her. She followed Sean from the truck, walking beside his fast pace toward the steps of the plane where the pilot stood in the doorway, casting impatient glances at the watch on his wrist.

"That cowboy's watching us. You'd think he'd have the decency to give us some privacy."

"We write scenes like this all the time, Sean. Just think of—"

She didn't get to finish. Sean swept her back with one arm, and she had only moments to grab his shoulders as he bent over her and laid a kiss that any romantic hero in a movie would be proud to have done. He made a swift whisper in her ear as he raised her back upright.

"Let him think on that one. Maybe I'll dust off my shelf for that Oscar I'm bound to get one of these days."

"Warn a girl next time and make it CeeCee. She'd appreciate it more."

The horn blared. "I've got work to do. Save it for his welcome home."

"Someone is a little grumpy." Sean said it with a pleased smile. "Be back soon. You and CeeCee have work to do."

“I know. Just get moving.” Laurel watched him until he disappeared inside the plane. Might as well make the parting scene a good one. Let Jaxson think she was pining away already.

The engine of the truck gunned into gear. Okay, maybe not. She turned and did take her time moving back to the truck and giving a final wave out the window as the plane pulled away.

“Why didn’t you go with him?”

Was that a double-edged question? Another of his jabs about her leaving? She gave him a slow smile. “And miss all the fun of the welcome home reunion?”

Laurel noted the tightening of the jaw muscle. Interesting. She found she took a great amount of pleasure in seeing the reaction. Could Jaxson be just a little envious? And what if he was?

Chapter Twelve

“I’ve got to hurry it up,” Jaxson’s words were beginning to be buffeted about just as they reached the camp and he had stepped from the truck. “That wind line has reached here, and the rain won’t be far behind it. We don’t need wet hay bales.”

Laurel slid out of the other side. The wind’s force made her grab for the side of the truck as she moved to the tailgate. Jaxson was already up in the truck’s bed, reaching for the first bale.

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“What do you think you’re doing? Get back in the truck.” The first bale landed in a plume of dust just inside the barn’s doorway. The truck couldn’t pull all the way inside so he had gotten as close as he could. Laurel stepped inside the doorway and grabbed a side of the baling wire that held the bundle together. She could pull it enough to get it inside the barn and out of the wind and soon-to-come rain.

“We can do it faster together. You toss and I’ll get them under cover.”

Jaxson had to admit he was surprised. But then this wasn’t the first time the two of them had done such a thing together. The fact that Laurel had fallen right back into the swing of things a hand could be found doing on a typical ranch day was surprising. She remembered their early days of teamwork, and it caught him off guard. Maybe the tough Texas wildflower hadn’t become a hothouse orchid while in Tinseltown.

“Don’t look so surprised, cowboy,” she said, exerting her strength and concentration to move the dead weight. “I might not be able to lift these bales like I used to way back when, but there’s more than one way to get a job done. Grandfather taught us all that on more than one occasion. Besides, my gym money hasn’t completely gone to waste, I guess.” She tossed a grin over her shoulder as she gave the third bale another tug.

Guess it was true that while you could remove a girl from the country, you never quite removed all the roots. Jaxson was surprised by how much that pleased him. Although he doubted that she’d be called upon to do much ranch work over on her side of the ranch once all the Hollywood changes were in place. But still he had to hand it to her.

Eight bales were inside with two more to go when the sound of huge drops pelting the metal roof of the barn began to echo inside the darkening interior. Their intensity stung Jaxson's bare arms.

"I've got these last two bales. Why don't you make a run for the camp house before this stuff amps up more? I'll follow in a minute, once I make sure all is settled in here and secure. We'll sit it out while the line passes. Best not to be caught by surprise out in the open."

*

Laurel nodded and, after pushing the last of her bales on the ground into place with the others, she sprinted toward the small house that stood between two live oak trees several yards away. The raindrops were cold and splattering the dust around her like pellets. She cleared the two steps and found reprieve under the cover of the porch.

The line camp was a converted farmhouse that had been refurbished after its first thirty-something years housing one of the ranch's families. There was an adequate kitchen area and long wooden table with trestle-like benches that could sit a dozen or so cowhands. A bathroom was evident through an open door down a small hallway, and the rest of the rooms had been opened up to allow for six bunkbeds, a fireplace, a couch, and some rocking chairs. A brown-and-white tanned cow's hide rug covered most of the wooden flooring in the main room area. A glance in the door beside her and there was an ample supply of canned goods and paper items.

"Your sister makes certain the line camps are stocked for whoever and whenever they are needed," Jaxson supplied, coming into the cabin, which only made it feel smaller and more intimate with his presence. Laurel felt a different vibe settle into the air around her.

It has to be the storm.

“So don’t worry—we won’t starve if we’re stuck here for a while.”

“Stuck here? This is a fine hotel compared to the hut with a dirt floor and no indoor plumbing that we were stuck in while filming last summer in Peru. That microwave alone boosts this to five stars.”

Jaxson smiled. “There it is. I was afraid you might have lost your sense of humor while living among the pretentious.”

“And you gained a bit more snobbery in your rarefied world of fat cattle and pampered equines.”

A streak of bright blue lit the interior of the cabin. A loud crackle followed and a crash of sharp-edged rumbling thunder brought the crescendo.

“Looks like we’ll be staying put for a little while.”

“Great. And how long is ‘a little while’?”

Jaxson gave a brief shrug. “I’m not a weatherman nor a crystal ball gazer. If it’s fast moving, then maybe a half hour to forty-five minutes. If it takes its sweet time, then we might want to look for some food to prepare for an early dinner.”

“I have things to do.”

“Like a salon or spa date?”

“Like running spreadsheets with the cost overruns. Calling to see if the soundboard and equipment is on its way from the coast and arriving on time, so I can schedule the engineers to be here when it arrives to keep us on the track to finishing out the first studio hall. And the list goes on. I would suppose you have a hot date tonight while

some of us are working.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” he said. “I need to make a quick phone call just in case I’ll be running late.” He slid his phone out of his back jeans pocket and stepped outside on the covered porch. He obviously wanted privacy for his phone call to Arabella or whomever else he had on his list. Laurel busied herself to ignore what he was up to, searching through the pantry and freezer.

*

“You’re at the south camp, sitting out the storm,” Beaudry repeated as he listened to his brother over the cell phone. “And you picked up Laurel and Sean along the way, and the three of you are stuck under the same roof now.”

“No, that is not what I said. I picked them up, yes. I need you to send someone out to bring in her truck when the storm passes. It’s two miles from the airstrip headed toward this camp. We made it here and were unloading the bales when the storm hit.”

“You passed the airstrip? Wasn’t Sean supposed to catch the plane?”

“Yes, and he did that.” Jaxson knew what was coming next. And his brother didn’t disappoint.

“I see. So, you and Laurel are stuck at the camp together. Alone.”

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“It would be wise to end this call at this point.”

“Why? It’s just getting interesting. This is a perfect opportunity for you.”

“Opportunity? Don’t push your luck, little brother.”

“Opportunity for you both to bury the hatchet, and not in each other.”

“I’m pretty sure that the hatchet in my back is already there to stay. But thanks for the advice.”

He heard Beaudry exhale a low, exasperated breath on the other end. “I’d say it was a perfect time, given the fact you are still hung up on the lady and you and she have time to pass, so why not make the most of it? But then again, I forgot your pigheaded stubborn streak for a minute.”

“I’m going to end this call right now. Just send out a couple guys to bring the truck back to the barns after this clears. We’ll hope to make it back in before dark. At least, I made the delivery to the camp before it hit. The boys can pull from here tomorrow for the next feeding down at the loading corrals. Goodbye.”

Blasted brother of mine. Jaxson mumbled the words as he slid the phone back inside his jeans pocket. Beaudry wouldn’t give it a rest. Things were more complicated. There were other things, other people in the mix.

Then his mind switched back to the moments in the truck earlier when Laurel was clearly uncomfortable sitting so close to him over the bumpy road. Could he help it if

the road was rough, and she kept getting thrown against his body? Well, maybe he might have gone slower and not purposely made a few more sharp turns than necessary along the way. But did he feel sorry about that? Nope, not even a little bit. Might that have stirred an ember or two for her?

Well, it had stirred much more in his case, causing some discomfort beneath the zipper of his jeans and maybe some pitched breathing and an itch to want to reach out and touch the bare skin of her arm, inviting his fingers to linger and not jerk away. Darn Beaudry. He just had to stir the pot. The rain had cooled the air and the wind was kicking up again, bringing gooseflesh along his arms.

Jaxson made the quick decision, and he dashed across the open ground, being pelted with larger drops until he reached the inside of the barn. Reaching inside the cab of the truck, he found his shirt and shrugged it on, not bothering to button it at the moment. He shut the door and looked back across the open expanse at the cabin where Laurel was probably pacing the floor and watching the hands on her expensive gold watch click away her work time being wasted out here in the middle of Nowhere, Texas.

What was she doing? What was she thinking? How did she think she and Sean meshed as partners? Maybe they did as business partners, but as a married couple? They were poles apart. He couldn't see it. Maybe he was jealous. No maybe about it, you idiot.

Now his inner voice was even calling him names. And he probably deserved it. But why did she have to come back and stir things up again? Except he might have to admit that those things, those feelings had never settled at all. They had just been dormant, waiting for the spark to return to bring them back to life. Who had he been fooling? Obviously, no one but himself, judging from the comments of his family since her arrival. And the traitorous way his body and feelings had left him high and dry when he needed self-control the most.

He'd thought Arabella might be the answer. She was perfect for him. She wanted to stay right there in Texas, build a family, and she had made it clear that she would be quite willing to do it all with him. Any man would be one lucky fool to have a woman like that want him and his life. He had searched out a likely site that might be a good place to build a house for a family. It wasn't like he hadn't tried to move forward.

But with all of that, there was that one thing lacking—that particular spark that always filled him with warmth and fire and so much more he was at a loss to put into words. And it only came to life when Laurel Burkitt set foot in his world. She would forever be the one. And he would always be the fool for pining away after something he would never be able to keep from slipping through his fingers. She said she was staying this time. But how many times had she left before? And how often did her words cycle through his memory when she had told him that she could never be content to be a rancher's wife? How much clearer did she have to make it? She was a lady who had risen above his world.

He kicked the truck tire beside him. Being a lovesick fool had never appealed to him. He was tougher than that, and he shook his head at those idiots that he knew had suffered the pangs of some ill-requited affair. No way was any woman going to tie him up in knots like that.

Yet, one had done it, and she always would. That truth hit him like the blast of colder air that blew through the open doors of the barn at the same time. A shiver ran down his spine. It woke him up from thoughts that would do no good. The rumble of thunder meant another onslaught was coming, and he bowed his head, hand holding his hat on against the swirls of wind and ran back toward the cabin and the woman who waited inside.

Jaxson stepped inside and then he stopped. There wasn't any woman pacing back and forth in an agitated state. First of all, there was an aroma coming from the kitchen

area. He faintly recognized it, but then his gaze was caught by the fire that was beginning to blaze nicely inside the stone fireplace across the room. A kerosene lamp sent a warming glow from the center of the oblong wooden table that separated the kitchen and living room areas. And the pacing woman? She had her back to him, humming an old Patsy Cline standard while plating something that looked like food.

She turned with a large plate in her hands. “Are we heating the outdoors now?”

He realized that the door was still open behind him and shut it. He continued to stand in the same spot.

“Is something wrong?”

“I was just thinking I should go back outside and come in again. I might have stepped into something like *The Twilight Zone*. It’s confusing.”

Her blue gaze narrowed on him as she moved to set the plate on the table. “I know I will regret this question, but then you need to think long before you answer it as well. Why do you think you are in *The Twilight Zone*?”

“You aren’t pacing, looking at your watch, but you are actually cooking—on a woodstove of all things. And you built a fire.”

“Told you to think before you spoke. You seem to be shocked that I know how to do that with wood and a match or that I am willing to do the most mundane things people do every day. I’m not a hothouse flower on a shelf. I cook and wash dishes. I mop floors and I even like scrubbing tiles in a shower. I do some of my best screenwriting in my head while cleaning windows. I have a couple of gold statuettes on my desk, not because I’m an egomaniac, but because they remind me that I earned them with a lot of angst and doubts in myself and too much listening to voices of others along the way that made me have those doubts.”

She paused, seating herself at the table. “Now this is just a plate of nachos with things I found in the pantry. I didn’t know how long we would be here, but I can assure you, if need be, I can whip up a few more courses to go along with this appetizer. So dig in before they get cold.”

Jaxson took the bench across from her and tasted one of the cheese-covered tortilla triangles.

“This is really good. What’s the flavor under the cheese?” It was yet another surprise she had in store for him.

“I found some summer sausage rolls and heated some of that and crumbled it and added a few jalapenos. It isn’t the normal recipe, but one has to make do with what one finds in a strange kitchen.” By that time, Jaxson was on his fourth nacho. In the glow of the lamp, Laurel’s skin glowed golden, and the highlights in her hair were gleaming. He was struck again by her beauty, which could transform from sultry to natural country girl in a heartbeat.

“I was one of those voices you mentioned, wasn’t I? You took my words to heart and let them eat at you and your self-esteem. No wonder I don’t rank very high on the list of people who you can’t seem to spend five minutes around without doing battle. I’m sorry.”

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She finished the bite she had just popped into her mouth, a thoughtful look crossed her face, and then she looked at her watch.

“Let me remember the time and day and moment that Jaxson Hawkes actually made an apology.”

“There you go,” he responded. “That’s a habit of yours. You put up a wall and use your sarcastic wit to reinforce it. A defense mechanism I can understand now.”

“You do have a way of making people feel a bit inferior around you. I was determined to not let you do that to me and yet, I did just that—let you take up too much space in my head doing battle with you.”

“And here I thought it was because you really liked me but didn’t want to admit it.”

“We seemed to react like oil and water for sure. I usually don’t have any problems keeping those who annoy me well out of my way. But here I am back where I began, and you and I can’t say that even Texas is big enough for the two of us. What’s the likelihood of us burying the hatchet between us? In order to survive on these half million or so acres?” She tilted her head. “Did I say something amusing?”

“That’s the second conversation I’ve had today about burying a hatchet someplace. But never mind.” He stood up and carried the empty plate over to the sink. She followed.

“You don’t have to do that.” She watched as he pulled out dish soap and turned on the hot water.

“You cooked and I can clean. This is a democracy on this ranch if you recall.”

“I could have sworn it was a dictatorship. First, my grandmother and then it fell to you. Although, you were more like a prime minister or something. You did try to smooth over the sharp edges of the barbs she threw around daily.”

His hands stilled as he stopped washing the dishes she had used to prepare their nachos. “I guess between the two of us, you felt ganged up on. It was probably the best thing for you to leave.”

Her eyes widened as she met his gaze.

“You can say that now? You were always the one who tugged on me the most to stay here. Even Grandmother finally gave in and literally ended up pushing me to spread my wings in the last couple of years before she died.”

“I was being selfish. She chose not to be.”

“She had her moments. But why would you say you were selfish?”

Jaxson shut off the water and took the towel out of her hands. He took his time drying them before he finally turned to face her, a hand resting on the cabinet beside them and the other on his hip.

“Now I think you’re fishing. You know perfectly well. I laid out my guts to you on the last day before you left me standing at the airfield again. I was just the cowboy who had worshipped at your feet for the last decade or so. And finally got up the courage to ask you to stay here with me and not fly away. And you very politely told me that—”

“I remember the words,” she said, stopping him. “I’m not proud of the person I was

in that moment. I've thought about a lot of things since I left the last time. I wish I had done many things differently, but that's the darn thing about the past. You don't get to turn back the clock."

"Would you if you could? Would your words have really been any different?" The fire crackled louder in the silence. The rain had quieted outside.

Jaxson waited in absolute stillness. He could see there was a definite tug-of-war going on inside her. Would she say words that might change things for them?

Chapter Thirteen

"We don't get to turn back time. We just have to try to make the best of things going forward. I came back to Texas. And I am not flying away again—except on business—and then I will return because this is home."

"And what if Sean doesn't want to always stay here in this foreign country, as he has called it a few times so far? Making a spouse happy in a marriage—that might make you have to rethink your statement."

A shadow passed and dimmed her blue gaze. Was there something she wasn't saying? He got the feeling there was. It touched something inside him, and he acted first and thought last. His hand reached up to softly cup the side of her face. His thumb made a slow pass over her skin from the corner of her mouth to her jawline. The fact that she didn't turn or jerk away from his touch emboldened him.

"If I am sure of anything in this world, it's the fact that you and Sean are totally not a match. Maybe you've been in the land of pretend too long, but there's no mistaking the real thing when it comes along." He lowered his head to hers, and she did not pull away. It was a gamble, a jumping-off-the-cliff moment, his brain was telling him. He might hit bottom and die. He rolled the dice.

Their lips met in a tentative hello... a shared truce. Then he was lost in their warmth and softness and his hand slid slowly from her chin to rest beneath her thick hair on the back of her head and draw her into him. Kissing Laurel was the slice of Heaven he knew it would be. From their first fumbling attempt as teens in the hayloft one summer day to the adult one on her last night before she left for California the first time, the passion was still there, having grown into a wildfire blaze consuming his rational thoughts and taking them both along in its charging wake.

Her hands slid over his shoulders, and his other hand moved around her waist and gathered her into his length, his need to feel every inch of her against him feeding the flames. Yet something held him in check, for fear all would dissolve into a puff of smoke. His need was obvious, but he didn't want to break whatever the spell was that had woven itself around the moment. It was too fragile.

His kiss laid open his heart and all it held for her in that moment. There was no use pretending or dancing around the truth that had always remained the same. He had given his heart and mind and soul over to this woman many years before. And that was a fact that would never change as long as he drew breath in his body.

His tongue teased along the line, and her reply was to let him in to the warm confines he sought. Her arms locked behind his neck, and he felt, then heard, the soft rumble of a sigh of sweet ecstasy from within her. She arched into his arms, her body seeming to crave his as much as he did hers.

His lips moved across her jawline and teased the soft skin of her earlobe, bringing forth another sigh, more like a groan from within.

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“You can’t compare this to that Hollywood display at the airport.” The words were muffled against her skin as he sought his way back to her lips.

In an instant, he felt her body stiffen, and then her arms dropped. It was as if the fire had been doused with a bucket of water. She was slipping away from him, and he scrambled to wrap his brain around what he’d done and what he could do to stop and bring her back.

“This shouldn’t have happened. Not now. We’ve both made promises to others—I have Sean and you have Arabella. It’s complicated. This setting didn’t help either, so chalk it up to just getting carried away with the moment. How soon can we get back to the ranch? We both have reality waiting on us.” She stepped away toward the door.

And that was that. Jaxson felt anger at himself. They had the beginnings of something between them that felt like it was the start of a bridge—and he had to overread, overstep, take it too far. And it had exploded in his face. If she could walk away and turn off any feeling from their kiss, that was a reminder to him that their past was just that. He wouldn’t make another such mistake.

“Whatever the roads still are, we’ll find a way to get through to the ranch. You’re right—we wasted too much time here.”

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Wasted too much time. Was that how her remarks came across? So they had. But she had made promises to people, and they needed to be kept so close to the end of the bargain. Laurel had given her word and she always kept it. But this time, it had cost

her more than she could possibly know, and she couldn't turn back that clock and take back the words and make it right. Jaxson had done his Jaxson thing and closed himself off with an invisible wall between himself and anyone else around him. She wouldn't get past those defenses again. The Great Wall was firmly in place between them as they sat on their respective sides of the front seat.

The road was rough going, with the new ruts and washed-out rocks tossing them about the cab of the truck as its springs were not the best. A few times, Laurel had to catch a good grip on the door and dashboard to keep from hitting the ceiling. But Jaxson never said a word. His jawline was set in that "don't you dare" status, and his eyes were shielded behind those dark glasses. His hat was pulled low on his forehead, and he focused straight ahead.

Laurel wanted to scream by the time the truck pulled into the driveway, and he parked under the Porte cochere. Jaxson could easily have made her walk from the stable to the house, as the rain had turned into a light misting. But he hadn't. She hesitated for a moment, thinking he might say something. But the moments only lengthened. Then she slid out and doubted her mumbled thanks was even heard as he simply pulled the truck through and headed down the road to the stable office.

That's that.

The hall was empty, and the door to the study closed. Laurel made it up the stairs without running into anyone. Once the door to her sitting room was shut behind her, and only then, did she allow the dam of tears she had been pushing down with the lump in her throat finally bubble free and release the pain. She was the one who kept her cool, who never shed a tear in front of anyone, the one who had the thick skin. All the things people thought of her over the years were a bunch of fake bravado. Because she had a heart, and it had just broken into a thousand pieces. Love came for the first time, and she had just kicked it to the side of the road. Because she had made a promise, and the only thing she had left was that word. It had cost her everything.

*

“This is nice,” Sammi Jo said as they settled into the back booth at Coffee and a Chat. “I can’t remember the last time we were all able to do this together.”

“I can’t believe you were able to get this one away from her worksite,” Tally added. “You are the perfect example of a workaholic.”

“Okay, you both do not need to gang up on me,” Laurel responded, stirring the glass of tea in front of her. “I am a determined business owner.”

“That’s your fancy way of saying workaholic,” her sister said with a grin.

“Well, I’m just glad to have you ladies here today. So, tell me all the latest news about the baby and the ranch and when I get to cater food for an eligible sexy star,” Tally chimed in.

“You go first with baby news,” Laurel said, nodding at her sister. She reached for the basket that had been placed in front of her. “And I’ll just move this out of your way. We wouldn’t want you tempted away from the diet the doctor has you on.”

“Gee, thanks. I need to thank my husband for being busy today and not coming to my appointment with me. So now I have my sister being food police and eating all the homemade rolls.”

“I consider it a hardship, but I’ll take on the extra calories for you.” Laurel popped the buttered piece of warm roll into her mouth to make her point. She pushed the small plate with the carrots and celery stalks toward Sammi Jo with a somewhat apologetic smile.

“I’m sure Beaudry hates to miss the appointments. I’d say he could have let Jaxson

handle the work for a little while, but I do remember that, with Jaxson being gone and all, it probably makes it harder for him to get away.”

“Where is Jaxson?” Laurel tried to make it sound as innocent as possible.

“I thought I mentioned it, but he’s gone to Canada to visit a breeding program that he and Beaudry have been interested in for some time. Beaudry was supposed to go, but Jaxson stepped up and traded places with him. Jaxson said I’d feel better if Beaudry stayed close to home.”

“You can always count on Jaxson,” Tally said. “Question is which one of you will make it down the aisle first? You or Jaxson? I know Arabella was seen over at Deidra’s, shopping in the bridal gown section. That girl is ready, willing, and able to run down that aisle.”

“Three days. The wedding will be in three days.” A shocked silence followed. And Laurel’s silence was the most shocked. Where had that come from? One moment she’s surprised to know that Jaxson was gone—she’d thought he was trying to stay out of her way when she hadn’t seen him for the better part of the week. And then the comment about Arabella shopping for a wedding gown... that triggered it. A strange panic had erupted in her stomach. She needed to get things moving so she could get on with her own life. And, hopefully, apologize to Jaxson and explain why she couldn’t say the things to him that she had wanted to say that stormy day at the farmhouse.

“Three days? Are you crazy?” Sammi Jo sat up straighter with a look of panic on her face. “How am I just now hearing about this? Do you know how much is involved in a wedding? What are your colors? How many guests? What are you wearing? We’ve got to make lists.”

Laurel let her run out of air, and then she supplied the answers. “That is what CeeCee

has been doing. She is a great wedding planner, and she has everything in hand, from food to clothing. You'll find out more about it later today. And your invites will be hand-delivered in the next day also," she said to Tally. "It's all a part of keeping things low-key and under the press radar. It is what we wanted the most—no Hollywood circus." Tally followed the pair as they headed toward the front door.

"You best slow your sister down or we'll be headed to the hospital instead of the caterer."

Laurel shook her head. One complication after another. And she didn't have time to wallow in how she felt to know that Jaxson had put a few thousand miles between them and hadn't even said goodbye. But one thing at a time. She would have to begin letting others in on the plan and hope they would all be on board.

Chapter Fourteen

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Jaxson was tired, but he didn't think he was tired enough to be seeing things like Lacy in the barn, balancing on a long sawhorse, with a book on her head.

"So is this some new way of gaining knowledge? Maybe by osmosis?"

Lacy laughed and grabbed the book before it fell off. "Very funny, Uncle Jax. I'm practicing poise and bettering my posture. I want to walk like a lady down the aisle."

"What aisle? It isn't time for you to graduate yet, is it?"

That gained him another shake of her head. "I'm going to be a junior bridesmaid in Aunt Laurel's wedding. I can't wait. You should see the dress I'm going to wear. It is purple, and it's called tea-length. And I even get to wear real high heels, which is why I'm practicing walking like a lady too."

"I see." That was about all he could manage. Things had moved ahead while he was gone. From practically zero talk about a wedding to now, it sounded like it was on the fast track. He didn't care for how his stomach turned over, and he felt nauseous at the sudden realization. Somehow, the thought that Laurel could actually be serious enough to carry through with a marriage to someone so wrong for her as Sean had been set aside in his brain, but he couldn't ignore it any longer.

"There's going to be a band and dancing, and you'll dance with me, won't you, Uncle Jax? You said you'd teach me the two-step and some of the line dances next time we had a big party and this is going to be it."

"Sure, I'll dance with you. But you better get to practicing some more in those high

heels because I don't want you to be stepping on my toes and breaking them." That earned him a grimace and a roll of the eyes. The book went back on her head. Just as well, because he needed air and a quiet space. Jaxson led his horse into the second barn full of stalls and began to automatically go through the motions of unsaddling, rubbing down, and feeding his mount. It was automatic, and his mind needed the predictable movements. It made sense, and he needed things that made sense.

He hadn't seen Laurel in almost six days. Since the afternoon they shared the kiss. And he could have sworn her response wasn't that of a woman contemplating marrying another man in a short amount of time. She was just as much into what happened between them as he was.

Or had she just become that much of an actress during her Hollywood time? His brain warred with itself. Maybe she had changed that much and he just didn't want to admit it. Or maybe she might be realizing that what they had between them was worth investigating. Better yet, maybe he was just being a fool and grasping at thin air and coming up with empty hands. Wouldn't be the first time he had shown what a fool he was for the woman.

What he needed was to get away from all thoughts of her that evening and get himself centered to face whatever was coming in the days ahead. Beaudry was spending his time with his wife as a dutiful husband and expectant dad. So that left Matt, the third member of their group. He withdrew his phone, and it didn't take any time to count Matt in for some beers and pool at their usual watering hole on the edge of town. He needed to get to the point where if someone asked him where Laurel was, he could actually respond with "Laurel who?" Although that might take a little longer than half a lifetime, so maybe he would just settle for easing the ache in his heart for a couple of hours.

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“This was a good idea of yours, mi amigo,” Matt commented with a smile as they settled into a corner booth an hour later at The Red Rooster. It was your typical low-slung building, wood-beam ceilinged, polished wood floor, with a stage area at one end for the band that was going into their first set of country tunes. The bar was at the opposite end, with high stools and booths filling the area that then flowed into a large addition where several pool tables offered an activity other than dancing. Dartboards were available and a few arcade-style games made their usual pings and ringing bells as their buttons were pushed.

The kitchen served up the usual fare of nachos and burgers. Randy Vela and his wife, Dorie, owned the place and ran it, he as the chief bartender and Dorie overseeing the kitchen and business end of things. Both of them had graduated with the Hawkes boys and Matteo. They kept it clean and respectable, and area off-duty deputies made good money ensuring the peace was kept inside and trouble stayed outside.

The pair shared easy banter with their host and hostess and other hometown patrons, then settled down to enjoy the burgers they ordered and a couple of rounds of tall cold ones. There were more than enough females who managed to drop by their table and exchange small talk. Jaxson was content to keep his interest in the food and drink and let Matt turn on the charm. He was undoubtedly the playboy and most eligible bachelor in several counties. Finally, there was a break in their table visitors, and Jaxson shook his head.

“What’s so amusing?”

“You. I’ve never figured out in all these years what it is about you that females find so mesmerizing. I used to think that they were either needing glasses or just desperate.”

Matt grinned and took another swig of his beer. “But you don’t think those things any longer, right? You see that it is just my natural machismo suave charm and that I

know how to please a lady, no matter the situation. Take lessons and you will learn from a master.”

Jaxson lifted his foot off the floor and made a slow perusal of it, especially the bottom of his boot. The move wasn’t lost on Matt.

“Not amusing, my friend. Rather desperate. But I’ve learned to deal with fellow male jealousy.”

“Well, all that charm must not work all the time, because you’re here eating a burger and drinking a beer with me and not some amazing senorita.”

“True, but I took pity on you. You need me more right now.”

“How do you figure that one?”

“I saw your brother in town yesterday, and he said all the news is on the wedding that is rumored to be taking place this weekend. Since the bride happens to be the one woman we all know you have pined after for most of your years, that has to be why you needed to find someone to hang out with and drown your sorrows tonight. I am up to the task.” He motioned to Randy and soon the waitress was dropping off two more fresh longnecks on their table.

“I’m not here drowning my sorrows, or pining, as you put it, for any female. But I do have a question for you in turn. You and my brother have been so positive about the fact that I am in some sort of ‘pitiful me’ situation of unrequited love, so I should ask you, the expert in such things, how did you get over losing MacKenna? She walked away from you, and you were a sorry sight for quite a while, as we can all testify. Yet, here you are, your old self and playing the field without a care in the world. How did you do it?”

Matt swirled the remainder of the amber whiskey in his glass, a reflective pall replacing the grin of earlier. “who says I did it? Perhaps one learns to live with a deep sorrow or disappointment... even a broken heart... without having it shown to the world.”

“Well, I know that was a lawyer’s way of saying nothing about something. I will say flat out that my life is just fine, and I am getting on with it, regardless of what you all think.”

“My friend, I am an attorney. A very, very good one, as we all know. And I can tell when a person is not being truthful with me. That is my stock-in-trade. So, hand that bull poop to someone else. My cross-examination is simple—do you love her?” He laid the question out as if before a witness on the stand, his gaze leveled at Jaxson’s.

Jaxson held the interrogation stare. “I respectfully plead the Fifth.”

“You are one slippery, onery fool. But that is as good as stating a yes for the record. Next question—what are you going to do about it?”

“Again, I plead the Fifth.”

“Well, if I were you and I was giving you free legal advice, you best do a lot better with your pleading. Because the lady in question just walked in the door with what I assume is the fiancé of the hour and their very interesting and beautiful lady friend.”

Jaxson didn't turn and look over his shoulder. He didn't need to. He felt her presence, and it was uncanny and disconcerting, and he wished he had just stayed on his ranch and drank alone. It didn't help that Matt stood at that moment and threw open his arms in a smiling welcome. Laurel went straight into his hug, and they laughed and greeted each other. She made the introduction of her fiancé to Matt, and CeeCee and Matt had already met. Then she turned and the smile froze a bit. To her credit, she kept it from being obvious to all but Jaxson and herself. He slowly stood from the table, remembering his manners.

“Well, if it's not the hero cowboy,” CeeCee spoke into the silence, smiling at Jaxson. “I heard about you saving the day and getting Sean to the airplane in the nick of time.”

“It was just my lucky day, I guess.” Jaxson's response was double-edged. He caught the flash of something in Laurel's eyes before she gave her attention back to Matt.

“Don't let us interrupt you two and your night out on the town. I see a table over—”

“Nonsense! This booth has more than enough room and we'll add a chair for your fiancé, and we'll make it a party. You ladies just slide right in, and Sean, you pull up that chair over there.” Matt took control over it all as easily as directing a courtroom.

So that is how Laurel and CeeCee were soon seated in the middle of the curved leather. Which placed Matt and Jaxson on either end. Sean, no longer smiling, sat in the chair.

Dorie came over, greeted the new arrivals, and then took their orders. Jaxson was thinking how much time he should stay in this uncomfortable atmosphere before escaping with a plausible excuse that wouldn't sound too lame. He caught Matt's raised eyebrow. He clearly was ahead on that score and just waiting for Jaxson to speak up and make an excuse. Well, the life of the party would have to be Matt or Sean. Jaxson was going to stay under the radar.

There was a lull, and Sean finally broke the silence. "Does the band know how to play anything other than country? Most bands usually try to change things up. But I suppose that's unheard of in this small country town."

CeeCee shook her head with a frown at the man. "This is a country dance hall in a country town, and these patrons love this music. And so do I. It's time to get this party moving a bit. She looked at Matt and he stood up, allowing her the space she sought. But instead of reaching for Matt's hand, she took Sean's hand in hers and pulled him to his feet. He was very reluctant. Her grin dispersed the pout on her face, and she finally got her way. They were soon in the middle of the other dancers participating in a boot scootin' line dance. Sean was clearly out of his element. But CeeCee kept him at it.

"Well, I'd say this would be a good time for us to join them." Matt stepped up and did what he had wanted Jaxson to take the hint and do—he offered his hand to Laurel, who took it and moved to join him on the dance floor. That left Jaxson to nurse his drink in silence... alone. And watching with some interest how CeeCee was able to draw out Sean and Laurel wasn't a bit concerned. This wasn't the first time he had noticed how the trio seemed to change things up, and he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something between Sean and CeeCee. How could Laurel be so

blind about it?

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“In case I haven’t said it yet,” Matt began, as he led them around the outer rim of the dance floor in a perfect gliding two-step, “I’m among those awfully glad you decided to come home and stay put this time. You do plan to stay, right?”

“Not you too. I don’t know what else to do to prove that fact to people.”

He grinned and gave her a twirl, surprising her. Then brought her back into his arms. “You haven’t lost your moves, I will say that. It’s just that there are a lot of people here who want you here for good. For a variety of reasons.”

“Why do I think you laid out a hidden lead question there, counselor? You have something to say, then say it.”

“That’s our Laurel... always lay it out plain. Except when it comes to matters of the heart, that is. And I feel the heat from the fire beginning behind those beautiful eyes of yours. You know you say more with those blue gems than anyone else I know.”

“And you are stalling with your answer. Your legal two-stepping is almost as slick as your dance moves.”

Matt threw back his head and allowed a deep-rooted laugh to escape. “Very well, Miss Burkitt, answer yes or no. And there is no Fifth pleading. Our silent cowboy over there who has not stopped throwing daggers my way—you know that you and he are far from over, right? If ever two people were made to dance together for a lifetime, evidence proves the point. You agree, yes or no?”

Laurel’s smile slid away. “I know my constitutional rights, and I can and do plead the

Fifth. And you should remember that there are also those pesky extenuating circumstances that can toss your sure-fire win into the trash can.”

“And that tells me all I need to know. Your secret is safe with me. It will be interesting to see how that wedding turns out in a few days. I do love a good party.”

“You got an invite? You are one of the favored few.” The pair paused, surprised by Jaxson’s sudden appearance. “I better get my last chance in for a dance with the bride-to-be before your ardent fiancé over there steals you away.” The trio glanced in the direction of Jaxson’s nod. The ardent fiancé was very definitely into the slow dance that had begun to play. One would be hard-pressed to find any daylight between the two bodies. No one said anything. Then Matt cleared his throat.

“Where are my manners? I feel the need for more libations, so you two have the dance floor.” He paused for a second as he went to step off the floor, and his words were for Jaxson in passing. “Don’t blow it this time.”

Jaxson looked down at the silent woman before him. He lifted his hand, palm up. She could turn and leave him flat. But she didn’t. After a second or two, she lifted her gaze from his hand to meet his eyes. Her hand was small inside his, but that connection was all he needed. Stepping forward, his other arm encircled her waist and they moved easily into the waltz steps.

They made a half turn around the wide dance floor before either spoke. Now or never. It was easy for Matt to tell him not to blow it. He had crashed and burned twice before with this woman. The third time would be the final strikeout.

“I saw Lacy in the barn practicing for her big debut as a grown-up bridesmaid. Although I wasn’t aware putting a book on your head was necessary.” That seemed safe enough a subject to begin with.

Laurel found her smile. “It worked for me and not so much for Sammi Jo. Grandmother made us do that, and Lacy heard us talking about it one day. So I guess she’s taking it to heart. Although, I think it did work.”

“The date is coming fast. I imagine you’re getting bridal nerves. I had no idea there was even a date set when I left here for the far north. I come back and the clock has done double-time. Why so suddenly?”

The smile faded. “Nothing sudden about it. We’ve never stated the date to anyone but our planner. We’re working hard to keep everything out of the press. People are concentrating on the big news about the movie studio and campus, and anything else is far less newsworthy. The wedding will be just what we want—nothing elaborate, just people who matter to us, a nice barbeque dinner, and then off to the islands.”

“I thought you always had this daydream about this wedding with all the flowers and huge cake and—”

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“Those were the musings of a teenager. This plan makes sense. And your comment about being invited you made earlier with Matt—it’s because you were gone that I didn’t get a chance to tell you that you are definitely on the guest list.”

He chose to ignore the words that came to mind at that moment. Jaxson’s gaze landed on the couple on the far side of the floor. “And CeeCee has everything planned the way you and Sean want it. It comes in handy having such a good friend as your wedding planner. What part will she play?”

Did he sense a change in his partner? She missed a step and then caught the rhythm back up again.

“CeeCee will be there. She’s the detail person. Sammi Jo will be matron of honor and Lacy will be the bridesmaid.”

“Why do I have a feeling that you have something stuck in your brain about CeeCee and Sean? Are you thinking there is something more than friendship between them? Because if that’s the case, you need to drop that idea, and do not go spreading around such nonsense, either.”

Laurel stopped. Her chin came up, and she fixed him with a sharpness in her gaze. She withdrew her hand from his. “Hate to burst your imagination, but a man and woman can be really good friends, and that is all.”

“Well then, guess there is always hope for us.”

“I doubt that.”

“I think you’re right,” he said, something taking over his better judgement. “Sean isn’t the man for you. I think you know that, but for whatever reason, you won’t admit it to yourself. This is more about business than love. There’s no passion between the two of you. You don’t even wear his ring. It just doesn’t add up.”

“Then you need to refresh your math skills. It adds up just fine for us, and that is all that matters. And if you feel like this, I guess you won’t be joining us for the wedding?”

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. However, you know I can’t refuse a good meal and a party. And then there is the dancing part. How could I miss out dancing with you at your wedding?”

“My dance card might be full. But do enjoy the free food.” She turned away and he should have let her go. But he just had to have the final words.

“Mind if I bring a plus-one? Arabella would enjoy taking some notes.”

Laurel shook her head. “Why not? Bring your girlfriend along. The more the merrier.”

She turned away and didn’t look back. Laurel was soon lost to view in the crowded area of the pool hall where Sean and CeeCee had moved with Matt.

Instead of joining them, Jaxson headed for the front door, not pausing to return words with acquaintances along the way. He needed to be free of people. Pulling away from The Red Rooster, he had no destination in mind. How was he expected to behave as he watched Laurel make a huge mistake? Granted, he had selfish reasons, given the glaring truth that he couldn’t ignore—he loved Laurel. He had for most of his life. And he had a bad feeling it would last for what was left of it. His fist hit the seat beside him. Bringing up Arabella had definitely been the wrong thing to do. Laurel

had gone cold and he had been shut out.

What was he supposed to do now? How did one cut out his heart and still keep breathing? And he also knew that he needed to have a conversation with Arabella. It wasn't fair to allow her to keep thinking they had a chance. It would be a long time before his heart would be ready for anyone else.

Maybe never.

Chapter Fifteen

Two days had passed since she walked away from Jaxson. Why should she expect to come across him at the ranch? Half a million acres for a guy to get lost in if he wanted to avoid a crazy female. And she certainly felt that part as the clock ticked faster, bringing the wedding day closer. They were in the homestretch. She and Sean would both celebrate when it was all over and done. And she might even offer that dance that Jaxson had mentioned the last time they saw each other. But maybe he had changed his mind. Maybe his dances would all belong to Arabella. That was something she didn't want to think about. So she had taken one of the pickups and found her way up to the crest of Willow Ridge.

The sun was glinting its last rays against the stained glass insets of the upper arched windows. It was even more beautiful that she remembered, the glow bringing life into the natural stone walls. Laurel turned off the engine and sat for a moment, breathing in the fresh breeze coming through the open windows of the truck. Birds were calling out to each other, small yellow butterflies flitted between the wildflower blooms, and a hummingbird hovered among the petals of the wild roses that filled tall trellises on either side of the double wooden doors in front.

She slid out of the truck and slowly walked forward. To her surprise, the front door opened under her touch and she stepped inside. Just as she thought—the light

streaming through the stained glass insets infused the interior of the small wood-and-stone church with rainbows of colors. It was magical... just like she'd imagined it could be all those years before. It was as if someone had looked inside her mind and brought it to life. Laurel walked the aisle between the oak pews to stand before the raised lectern at the end. Her gaze lifted to the simple cross of glass that would allow the full beauty of the sunset over the valley beyond to fill the interior. How often had she ridden to this spot on her horse when she escaped from the world of cattle kingdom reality to envision what her future might hold?

“What is it about this old falling down stack of rocks that keeps you coming up here?” Jaxson had first discovered her secret place when he was fourteen. She had let him know that neither he nor his comments were welcome in her space. But that didn't keep him from coming back and being a pain when she just wanted quiet.

When she was sixteen, he had stopped being a pain. And one day, when the sun was much the same as that moment, he had walked up the rock-strewn aisle and stopped in front of her. There was something different, a charged feeling in the air that day. It was the best way she could put it. Did it cause him to behave differently? He hadn't stopped walking until he reached her, only a few inches of space separating them. She stood on the raised stone where an altar once stood. That put her almost eye to eye with him. She stood as if cemented in place as she watched that darkened gaze take control of hers, and very slowly he had lowered his head to hers, his mouth taking possession of hers.

So many thoughts and feelings had assailed her. There was shock, then euphoria. At last, she was being kissed by him, the object of her first serious crush on a member of the opposite sex. And he spoke to her in a whole different language that she had never known before. Only their lips joined them, their hands remaining at their sides. She had wanted to cry out for more when he lifted his head and slowly examined her face, her still parted lips. Laurel had wished she was more experienced so that she might read what his thoughts were all about. But Jaxson was practiced in keeping his

thoughts his own even at a young age. He had spoken first.

“Our first kiss in front of an altar. Maybe our history begins right here. Who knows?”

“Changing your mind?” The boy’s image in her mind disappeared in a puff of smoke and the reality of the grown man materialized as he moved with his usual quiet steps up the aisle toward her. She was rooted to the spot, morphing from the dream of the past to the present reality.

“What do you mean, changing my mind?”

“I thought maybe you were deciding to move your nuptials from the gardens at the house to up here in your favored spot. It always seemed to be where you daydreamed about such girl things. I think it suits you. But then, maybe I just haven’t given up on the Texas girl in you being strong enough to not being totally replaced by the fancy California girl with more upscale views.”

“You always have such an infinite power to say the wrong thing. Maybe that’s why we shouldn’t talk.”

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“Maybe you’re right,” he responded. He matched her flippancy. “Maybe that means we communicate in other ways. I can think of a way or two that are much better than talking. But, then, you’d probably slap my face if I tried.”

She shook her head, then sighed. “What are you doing up here? Or are you following me?”

“I was helping vaccinate the yearling herd and saw you headed this way. Guess curiosity got the better of me. Don’t you have a family dinner tonight in town? Celebrating your upcoming day and all?”

Laurel shrugged. “I’ll make it in time. What about you? You’re invited to that as well.”

Jaxson shook his head, his gaze going to the stained glass above them. “I’ve got to stay close to home tonight. There’s a line of storms moving in later from the west, and we’ve also got two of our best mares beginning to drop this evening.”

“And the ranch always comes first with you. That won’t ever change.”

“No, I own that. But while it might not change in its need, I do realize there is room for other things that may mean more and are just as important.”

“Do tell?”

“Like you, maybe I realize that it’s time I found my own family. A wife, a kid or two. Change that house I visit now and then into a home where I know I want to build a

real life from within its walls. Guess that's what hit you all the way out there on the West Coast too? Just can't figure out how that turned into you bringing your Hollywood husband back to a ranch in Texas to make your start. But I guess stranger things have been known to happen."

Laurel had to fight down the sudden urge to want to level with Jaxson. But she had given her word, and there was a lot riding on her keeping it—just for a little while longer. Her first confession would be to her sister later that evening. Then tomorrow, she was going to explain everything to Jaxson. She wouldn't allow herself to even guess at how Jaxson would receive the news when she could share it. But she hoped it would make a difference. Enough of a difference that he might rethink Arabella as a candidate for a wedding ring. She wouldn't allow her mind or her heart to take that thinking further along the thought process. Not yet.

For the moment, they stood face-to-face, in silence, each lost in their own private thoughts. Yet somehow, she had a feeling that they were much the same. Years ago, there was the possibility that one day they might end up at such an altar together, handing over their hearts to each other. Then that dream seemed shattered. She would never be able to get the look in his eyes out of her brain when she had finally made him understand that she would not be his wife, and he needed to let her go. She had been responsible for his pain.

Now, she was able to experience much the same pain.

"Well, I better get moving," Jaxson spoke, breaking the spell. "Don't want to be the reason you're late for your party." He slid his hat back on his head. "Take care, Laurel."

He walked back down the aisle. She was glad he couldn't see that her palms had curled around the edges of the lectern and were tightened in a death grip to keep her from succumbing to the urge to go after him. And do what? Say the words that had

probably been hiding behind walls in her brain while she tried to pretend otherwise? The door closed behind him. Slowly, her grip loosened. Laurel looked up at the large cross set into the stone walls with its stained glass where the setting sun was just beginning its slide.

I love him. I always have. But I don't deserve him. And maybe it's too late.

The silence had lost its comfort.

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"Hello, do I know you? You look vaguely familiar to me. Seems like I might have heard a rumor or two that you could be related to my husband? Are you that guy in the family photos?"

Jaxson tossed the curry brush into a bucket, making a loud clang in the cavernous barn. He straightened and turned. "And here I thought you resembled that sweet lady who married my brother a while back. I must have you confused with someone else, I guess."

Sammi Jo grinned and moved to stand with her arms crossed on the stall door. "You missed dinner. And before that, you disappeared for a week to the wilds of Canada. And so I thought I'd just track you down to see if you still exist."

"Well, in case you haven't heard lately, we've been a little busy. Seems the four-legged animals on this place require attention now and then. And we have this really mean boss lady that we don't like to cross."

"Mean boss lady? You better add pregnant, mean boss lady, because that could become more of a reality than you know. Your brother would rather face a tornado than a wife with raging hormones and pregnancy cravings. I'm surprised he hasn't

moved in with you yet.”

“Okay,” Jaxson said, throwing up his hands. “Too much info there. And thanks for the warning. I’ll get the locks changed as soon as I get back.”

“Get back? From where?”

“Tom and Joanne’s first grandbaby is due any day now. They want to be here, so I’m going to take the two studs we’re loaning to the Tremaynes down south to them. Then I’ll cover Tom’s cattle penning in the north section for a couple of days. He deserves this family time.”

“I see. I think.” Sammi Jo eyed him with that Burkitt trademark interrogation stare. The only person who might do it better was her sister. He tried to avoid it whenever possible. Jaxson picked up the bucket and brush and stepped outside the stall, sliding the bar with a loud clang into the lock. He headed toward the tack room. But if he thought that would deter a Burkitt, he was wrong.

“You’ll miss the wedding. But then I’m thinking that’s the underlying factor for your altruism and concern for Tom. And don’t waste your breath telling me I’m wrong. Come clean, Jaxson. You’re a man running away from my sister.” She stepped in front of him at the doorway to the workroom, arms folded, determination in the glint of her gaze.

Jaxson almost made the mistake of trying to toss her off the trail and reiterating why he was going to be away. But she wouldn’t buy it. And he wasn’t going to get on her bad side. Perhaps he could pull off a version of the truth.

“Look, you know Tom’s daughter is alone, with her husband off in the military. She needs a support system in place. You can understand how important it is for you to want your family with you, so think what it means to her. If you were me and could

help out in this way, you'd do it too. And it is also true that weddings aren't my cup of tea on a normal day. I figure it's a good deal to not be there, as your sister knows how I feel about her chosen fiancé. Sorry if you're a fan of his, but he isn't what any of us would have expected. But it's her choice, not ours. So, there you have it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“Wow, you are good. Much better than your brother. I get what you're saying. Except you left out one important element.”

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“I suppose you’re going to tell me what that is whether I ask you to do so or not?”

“Smart man. And yes, you didn’t mention that you don’t care to watch Laurel make a mistake in marrying the wrong man. Because I know that you love her. And I know how much it can hurt when you face the possibility of losing that chance at love. So, I am not going to push it. I am going to do this...” And she went up on tiptoe, pulling on his shoulder to bend down, allowing her to place a kiss on his cheek. “Laurel is waiting for me at the house on a matter of urgency with the wedding, so I need to get moving.” Then she stepped out of the doorway.

“I won’t say anything else. Safe travels. Come home soon.”

Jaxson watched her go. Not for the first time did he think what a lucky man his brother was when he had wised up to the fact that Sammi Jo was the love of his life, and he wasn’t going to let her go. Beaudry was a lucky man to have had the woman feel the same about him.

It was time. Time for him to deal with the truth and to let Laurel live her life and make her choices. When he got back, she’d be a married woman and that would make things easier, right?

You are a fool if you think that, Jaxson Hawkes.

Chapter Sixteen

Things were moving at the speed of sound. What had seemed like plenty of time a week before now seemed like they were losing daylight fast and sliding downhill.

The more decisions made left even more to decide. The checklist for the small wedding had grown in length. At least once an hour, Laurel had paused to rethink the sanity in her agreeing to pull off a wedding of any size in almost total anonymity of the real participants. She paced the length of the room again. The clock chimed the hour. And she heard the sound of Sammi Jo's voice in the hall. She drew in a deep breath and released slowly. It was time to clue in the family.

"Sorry." Sammi Jo entered with a contrite smile and a small jar of her favorite pickle juice in hand. "I had to go through the kitchen and grab this. The cravings are getting worse." She kicked off her boots and settled in the overstuffed chair that she had come to prefer over any other chair in the house. Laurel remained standing.

"I can't believe that you are craving pickle juice and strawberry ice cream... together."

"I can't either, but it is really good. And Beaudry is picking up another gallon of the ice cream in town right now. So the juice will have to do. Is this something bad? You're still standing."

"No." Laurel hastened to lay that thought to rest. "I just think better when on my feet, and this is something that goes better that way."

Sammi Jo plumped another pillow behind her. "Okay, spill it. You'll feel so much better."

"It's the wedding."

"I knew it. You've come to your senses."

Laurel frowned. "My senses? What's that supposed to mean?"

“Don’t mind me. These pregnancy hormones just make me say and do all sorts of strange things. Continue.”

“I’m not buying that, but let’s get on with it.” Laurel took a deep breath. “I’m not getting married.” Then she hastened to add at the shock on Sammi Jo’s face, “But there will be a wedding.”

“And now I am wondering if there is something I can add to this pickle juice to make it a little stronger.”

“Good one. But here goes the story. You know that Sean and CeeCee and I met on my first trip to LA. We sort of gravitated together. Sean was already making a name for himself. And I needed a way to get my work in the door. As an unknown entity and a female, the chances were slim it would happen in this decade. But he went to work and pushed some people who owed him a favor or two and got me in the door... at least the first couple. Then I turned around and did much the same with CeeCee, getting her some small parties, and then Sean got some of his important friends to hire her.”

“Sounds like a good movie script,” Sammi Jo responded.

“Well, it gets better. Sean fell for CeeCee and vice versa, but it wasn’t all roses. CeeCee comes from a really rough childhood and family life, and she wanted to keep that away from her life she was building. It was very important to her. Anyway, so he agreed to invest in this dream of the movie studio here, and in return, he wants to give CeeCee the wedding of her dreams without her life spread across pages in a gossip column. So, there will be another surprise when she steps in as the true bride and, hopefully, we will have been able to pull off a great wedding for two people who I dearly love.”

“She is putting together a dream wedding for you, but it will be hers?”

“Yes. And I gave my word to Sean. We managed to keep the press looking elsewhere for their stories. The studio news worked to be a perfect foil and drew all attention away from anything else. This is the very least I could do for them for all the things they’ve done for me in LA. I hated letting people get the wrong ideas, but in the world the three of us have to survive in out west, you find you’ll do some strange things to hang on to even a tiny bit of peace and normalcy in your life.

“If I could help Sean give CeeCee her dream and also pull it off without anything marring the day, then I was in. I kept all of you in the dark as a layer of deniability for you. With local snoops like Melba getting in the mix, it’s been like walking a tightrope. I had to trust that when I was finally able to tell you all the truth, you would understand why I did it and know that none of it was meant to hurt anyone, but rather to help two people who were there for me when I needed them. Are you very angry?”

Sammi Jo did not respond for a few seconds, a thoughtful look replacing the shocked gaze.

“Not angry. Maybe a little hurt you didn’t whisper the truth to me when you arrived, but I also can understand you giving your word to your friends. And it is clear that there is a strong bond between you three. No one has been hurt in all of this.” Then she paused. “Except, if I were you, I would find Jaxson and clear the air sooner rather than later. To him, this is all very real.” Sammi Jo stood and slid her arm around her sister’s shoulders. She gave a reassuring squeeze. “But there is something that I ask of you.”

“Name it.”

“Be kind with Jaxson. He gives off that gruff, tough exterior, but it is only skin deep. He has a heart just like the rest of us. And for some reason, he laid his at your feet a long time ago. It’s been hard for him, your return this time. I love you both and just want mywholefamily to be happy... whatever that looks like.”

The groom-to-be was no help. He was sitting in a quiet spot writing and rewriting his vows. He said they were going to be the most important words he would ever pen in his life, and they had to be perfect.

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CeeCee was upstairs getting the hair and makeup people situated in their rooms. That left Laurel to tackle getting the wedding dress into its designated dressing room once it arrived. She found her glance going to her watch at least every five minutes. The designer had sent it on its way to Texas on time. So where was it? Another glance at her watch, and then the door chime sounded.

That had to be it! She flew down the last of the stairs from the second floor landing and skidded to a stop at the front door. She threw back the wooden door and stopped.

Jaxson stood before her. There was both a feeling of elation at the sight of him, but also a feeling of panic was beginning until she realized that he was holding a long garment bag over his arm. The gold lettering of the designer's name made her want to leap for joy. She would have opted to kiss the person delivering it, but that would have not been wise given the situation.

"I take it you might be a bride in need of a dress?"

She moved quickly, taking the dress in its protective covering from the cowboy and draping it over her two arms—the best way she could carry the gown. She headed into the dining room as the closest place she could lay the long bag out and hopefully not do damage to the contents.

Carefully, she drew the zipper down to where the top of the dress, with its heavy crystal beading, was exposed. The craftsmanship was intricate and beautiful.

"Since when do you like that color? Aren't brides supposed to be in white, or should I just not go there?" Jaxson stood beside her, looking at the exposed material in its

purple color with black beading.

Laurel had forgotten that the gown was ordered in that special color. It was CeeCee's favorite, and she was a fan of the Victorian era, so the dress was a replica of one worn by a member of the English royal court.

She put a smile on her face and played it off as best as she could. The words she wanted to say to him were right there in her throat, yet she couldn't say them. This sudden appearance had thrown her prepared plan off. She said the next thing that came to her brain.

"It's Sean's favorite color. And just how did you end up with this dress?"

"The delivery guy was lost down at the stables. I asked what he was looking for and that's how I knew you might be looking for this. I did him a favor and sent him on his way."

"Well, thanks a lot. I appreciate you doing this."

"So you have a dress. I saw you had other people arrive earlier. Looks like this party is going to come off."

"Yes, it does." They both were without words for a few seconds.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then. And this is probably where I should tell you that I do wish you all the best and hope you have a perfect day. You deserve it. And I didn't want to leave without saying that in person."

"Leave? Aren't you going to be here for the wedding? Why wouldn't you be able to say it to me then?"

“I’m not going to make it to the party. I am taking over for Tom, so he and Joanne can be with their daughter when she gives birth. Tom had deliveries to make of horses, and I’m taking them for him. Don’t frown. You won’t even miss me once you start down that aisle. I’m sorry I’ll miss having a dance with you—and maybe some of that wedding cake—but I know it’ll be great. I better head out.” Jaxson turned and headed toward the front door, sliding his hat on his head and taking determined strides.

Jaxson would not be at the ceremony. That had never entered into her mind. There were things he needed to know and she needed to say, and he was leaving. She caught up to him at the door. Her hand grabbed the door handle first. He looked down at her with a question in his eyes.

“I’m surprised and sorry that you won’t be joining us. I’ll save you a slice of cake for when you get back.” How insane did she sound?

“Thanks, but you’ll be on your honeymoon when I get back. I doubt you’ll have given a thought to me or anyone else. At least that’s how it should be. Bye, Laurel. Be happy.” And then he left her standing there with no idea what to do. And a pesky tear just had to escape her blinking it away. Brides weren’t supposed to cry before the big day. But she hadn’t counted on Jaxson not being there. What was she supposed to do next?

What else did a dramatic scene in a movie do? The unexpected. She went running down the steps, trying to keep her balance on the gravel in her heels. Jaxson was almost to his truck.

“Wait! Stop! You can’t go yet.” He turned with a look of shock on his face as she came to a halt, out of breath and hobbling on one broken shoe. It might not be her finest moment.

“What are you doing? What’s wrong?”

She took another gulp of air and tried to gather her thoughts to make some sense.

“I need to tell you something. It’s more of a confession. I planned to tell you later after the ceremony, but your leaving changes things, so you can’t leave yet.”

“Well, yes, I do have to leave. I made promises to Tom and his family, and the Tremaynes are waiting for me as well.”

“Fine. Then I’ll give you the short version. I’m not getting married.”

“That is definitely the short version. Maybe you better add a few more words to that sentence. Maybe a whole paragraph.” He folded his arms across his chest and allowed his body to lean back on the front of the truck’s hood. She definitely had his attention.

“Sean and CeeCee are getting married. But that is not for public consumption. We have worked very hard to keep it under wraps and throw people—notably the paparazzi—off the trail. And with the movie studio news, we were able to fly under the radar even better.”

“So, you came here and lied to everyone. You didn’t think you could trust us enough with the truth. You let people go out of their way to go along with your plans and believe that the community was going to benefit from the studio being built here?”

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“The studio is still being built here.”

“And the part about you staying here... is that real or not?”

“Real. Why are you acting like you’re mad?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I take exception to people lying to me and treating family like we’re untrustworthy. Sammi Jo probably gave you a hug and took it on the chin. But I should have known better. I knew something wasn’t right, but I kept giving you the benefit of the doubt. Well, I hope you have a great party and lots of laughs about how you managed to pull the wool over the country bumpkins’ eyes.” He turned and opened the door of his truck. She moved to the open window beside him, and he brought the engine to life.

“We’re not laughing, and no one thinks that. We didn’t set out to hurt anyone. I don’t know why you’re behaving like this.”

He gave her a long look, his glass lens reflecting her confusion. “That’s the truest thing you’ve said—and the saddest.” Jaxson left her staring at the empty driveway.

*

“I’m sorry that Jaxson reacted the way he did when you told him,” Sammi Jo said. “But I’m not all that surprised. Perhaps it’s good that he did take this trip. It could give him some distance and time to settle things in his mind. Once he has time to think it through, I’m sure he’ll better understand,” Sammi Jo finished. “There’s a wedding and a party, and you haven’t done all of this to not see it through.” She

turned to Sean and CeeCee. “We’re happy to have you both have your special day right here on Aces High. We’ll all do our best to make it perfect. And any pesky reporters dare to show their faces around here will find that this place can become quite a fortress, armed to boot.”

Everyone laughed. Laurel nodded. “And you all thought I was the spunky one of us. She hides her other side very well.”

Laurel felt a great burden had lifted from her. Everyone was smiling, and it was a beautiful day for a wedding with blue skies above. Even Lucky was outfitted in a lavender bow and greeted guests as they arrived until the pup began yawning and found a spot under one of the skirted tables to take a nap.

Yet, all the while she smiled and played the hostess, and then walked down the aisle to stand beside Sean as his best person and witness her two dear friends recite their vows to each other, there was something missing. Someone.

It was silly, but she kept looking around, hoping to see a tall cowboy with jade-green eyes that would make the day and evening absolutely perfect by his managing to show up at the wedding after all. It was crazy, her brain told her, but she couldn’t stop the hope that hid out in her heart.

The party went on for hours. The food was a hit with the people from the West Coast. Texas barbeque was a major success. The well-known country-western trio wowed the guests, and a dance band took over and, from salsa to rock to jazz, there was something to bring everyone out on the dance floor. Laurel danced until she finally had to abandon her high heels, glad her long, full, black taffeta skirt allowed her to hide the fact she danced barefoot part of the evening, even though she wasn’t the only female doing the same thing.

Lacy was dancing with Beaudry and then with a nice young man her same age.

Laurel found a perch on a porch swing next to her sister for a break from the partying crowd.

“They make a cute pair,” Laurel observed with a grin as the two young ones were hitting the dance floor again.

Sammi Jo nodded. “Well, you and I can appreciate that, but if you look across the floor at Beaudry, you’ll see that he is watching that poor boy with the look of a hawk sharpening his talons, waiting for one wrong move on his prey’s part.”

Laurel laughed as she eyed Beaudry eyeing his daughter and her partner. “Lacy has a good head on her shoulders. I don’t think either of you have anything to worry about.”

“You always start off with a good head on your shoulders until that one special guy comes along, and then all common sense is tossed out the window.” Sammi Jo looked at her sister. “For me, it was a Hawkes by the name of Beaudry. For you, a Hawkes named Jaxson. Or are you still trying to deny that, even though everyone else knows better except for you?”

“I didn’t sit down here for one of your lectures. As you recall, I am the older one.”

“Not even five minutes—that doesn’t fly any longer. Seems like you still have some explaining to do to a certain cowboy when he shows up. Hopefully, he’ll be more apt to listening now. So, keep your temper under control and tone down the sarcastic wit. Try just being open and honest and let the chips fall where they may.”

Laurel would have made a comeback except for the fact that it made sense. She did need to make things right with Jaxson if he would hear her out. She needed to apologize for a few things. But would he listen? Would he understand? Had he calmed down? Things were usually black or white in his book. And this would

definitely fall into the gray area.

As the clock ticked on, the guests began their trek back to the airstrip for the flight back to the West Coast, and the bridal couple prepared to take off in the ranch's private jet for their honeymoon. Laurel was feeling more restless, and that brought on her need to grab another slab of the wedding cake, a glass of milk instead of champagne, and a pair of her fuzzy neon-green house shoes on her tired feet. She said goodbye to the couple and then snuck out a side door and headed down to the stables, Lucky in her arms. As she used to do when she had a lot on her mind, she found a perch on a bale of hay in a corner across from the horses. She could talk to them, and they always understood her. They never judged. And they eased her soul. Lucky snuggled down in the soft mound of hay in a corner and drifted off.

As she was halfway through her cake, she heard the jangle of spurs on the concrete walkway. Someone had entered the stables. They couldn't see her perch, so they would do whatever they needed and be on their way.

She saw the boots first, then the chaps on long legs, and the belt buckle she recognized. Her gaze flew upward and met that familiar jade one—a tired and a surprised one.

“The plane took off.”

His words weren't the ones she expected.

“Yes, it did.” Wherever he was going with his train of thought, it was buying her time to gather her wits about her.

“I saw two people getting on the plane. One I could tell was Sean. The other was female. But you aren't there—you're here. So, it really was CeeCee starring as the bride.”

“Can’t put anything by you.” Watch the temper and the sarcasm. It had been good advice she should have followed. His gaze had taken on a glint at her response.

“Was there a wedding today?”

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“Yes, there was. It was a big success. Sorry you missed it.”

“And now you are sitting here eating cake and drinking milk from a champagne flute. And that green footwear... is that the latest style from the West Coast?”

He might be catching on.

“It is if you’d been on the dance floor far too much in a pair of ridiculous heels. Care for some cake? It is incredibly good. Sorry I didn’t bring along any champagne. I wasn’t expecting company.”

Jaxson took her offer of a seat next to her on the bale. That only made the nervous butterflies in her stomach take flight. She offered him the plate with the cake. He shook his head. She took a sip of the milk, wishing it was something a bit stronger to help calm her nerves.

He smiled and she almost choked. Jaxson removed his leather gloves and, with one thumb, reached over and wiped the corners of her mouth. “The milk mustache doesn’t go with the outfit.”

“You said you saw them take off. Where were you that you saw them?” The question popped into her brain and forestalled anything else.

“I was on the ridge at the end of the runway. It doesn’t have the best view, but then I got there a bit late.”

“Why did you...?”

“I was asking the questions first.”

Here goes nothing. Laurel dove in. “Sean and CeeCee got married. The subterfuge worked, and all went well for them.”

“Yes. It worked. Sean gave her the dream wedding, and nothing was allowed to spoil it for them. CeeCee was gorgeous and so happy. They both were. And I know that you were very angry earlier. And I’m sorry for that. But I gave my word, and I’d do it again. We three are a family. We helped each other hang on to our dreams and saw them survive and take off. I agreed to help, and we used the deal with the studios to provide a decoy... and if anyone got too nosy, there was a Burkitt wedding we could feed them. It all worked. But I’m sorry that it upset you as it did. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you. Far from it. I have trusted you for most of my life... with my life. I hope you can forgive me.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jaxson had a lot of mixed emotions. He had worried about things that were just smokescreens. And all could have been a lot easier if Laurel had just shared what was going on with him. As much as he wanted to stay angry about that angle, he was a lot more relieved than anything else. There was still a vestige of overriding fear that remained. Would Laurel tire of the project? Would Hollywood draw her back to its bright lights? Suitcases could easily come out of the closet.

Laurel’s words got his attention.

“I had about five seconds’ worth of doubt about my idea, but once I saw everything lined out on paper and the models laid out on the boardroom table for the studios, I knew it was meant to be. And you know me... once I make a decision, I am in it for the long haul. But I also realize that you have every right to doubt my decision because... well, you once expressed some feelings, and I was wrong in how I handled

all of that. It makes me cringe to think back to that time. I was flippant and sarcastic and while I often use that as my way of pushing away tough subjects, as you rightly accused me a time or two in the past, I was way out of line. I am truly sorry for being such a witch like that and hurting you.

“And I was wrong about a lot of things. I take after Grandmother in that I don’t do well with apologies. But it’s true what is said about leaving home and then realizing that no matter where you go or what you do, home is still inside you. And it is still what calls you back, good, or bad. But dreams can rearrange themselves and become even better. Thanks to those two little gold statuettes, I suddenly had some major bargaining chips at the table. I found that I could combine my need to follow my dream of writing and making movies with being back home, where my family is and where all those I love and care about still wait for me to realize all of that. It is hokey and trite but so very true: home is right where your heart is.”

“That’s true.” Jaxson nodded. “You might have left us, but I know there are a lot of people here who never quite let you go. They always figured you might find your way back to where you belonged. That’s the thing about hearts. They can be stomped on quite a bit, but they manage to get up and keep going no matter what.” This time he held her squarely to the spot with his steady gaze. “Looks like there’s something else you need to get off your chest, so let’s have it. Just plain talk between us.”

Laurel drew in another deep breath and squared her shoulders. Jaxson had seen that stance once before when she told him goodbye and flew away. He had asked for it, and it looked like she was about to deliver it.

“I’m thinking you were talking about your heart just now. Is that what you did? You put it back together and now you’re happy again since you have someone that fits the bill of that rancher’s wife you had in mind? You and Arabella seem a pretty good match.”

“She’s a beautiful lady with a good heart, and yes, she will make a fine wife. Someday.” He paused. But he couldn’t draw it out as he saw the light in those expressive blue jewels of hers dim. There was a hope there that he wanted to hold on to with all his might. “But it won’t be as my wife. Nope. I’m afraid that I’ve gotten too used to balancing on a thin wire over a blazing pit of fire. Being constantly surprised and aggravated at times, often at the same time. Life might be a bit too quiet with her.”

Laurel had snapped back to alertness. “So, who is this paragon you seem to be describing as your preference over ‘quiet’ Arabella? Would I happen to know her? Because I’m thinking she sounds like someone I might get along with. I’m sure we just might have similar traits when it comes to arrogant, stubborn cowboys.”

Jaxson reached up and swept the hat off his head, the other hand running through and pushing the thick hair from his forehead. The hat went onto a fencepost next to him. The leather work gloves he held went on the stool next to the stall. Then he leveled his gaze on the woman standing directly in front of him, her chin raised to take whatever he was ready to dish out.

“A man would have to be a glutton for punishment to hitch his rope to a firebrand like you. And if he lived to be a hundred, he’d never figure out how to know which way his day was going to go. You call me stubborn. Well, lady, you wrote the whole book on it. A cowboy does need some quiet and space once in a while in his life.” He couldn’t help the errant smile that made a corner of his mouth twitch then. She saw it. But she kept quiet, much to his surprise.

But then there are a half million acres or so that he can find that space and quiet on any given day. The problem is that he might already have become addicted to hanging on for dear life the rest of the time. Plain words: I knew a long time ago you were going to be trouble. And your granddad gave me some advice one day to let go of you and move on. You might not be back, but life needed to go on. And I took part

of his words and did that. Life went on. But letting you go...well, that just never seemed to work. So here we are in a smelly, dusty barn with several pairs of eyes watching us over their late snack chomping.

“You deserve something better like one of your fancy restaurants in Hollywood or Paris or wherever in the world you could be right now except here. But here is where you are and where I am, and this gets settled tonight. I don’t even have the ring that’s sitting in the safe at the house all this time for you, but if you’ll wait until—”

“No.”

That one word stopped him cold. It short-circuited his brain. Was she saying no to his proposal or at least the one he was making a mess of now?

“No, I am not waiting. Not one more hour or even a minute. And we are both growing old standing here right now while you say all those lovely words that are coming from your heart—and I do want to hear each and every one of them, I do—but right now, is there a question you are asking me? And does it require a yes or no?”

This was the woman he wanted to take on for the rest of his life. She had turned the tables again on him in a heartbeat. “I am asking the same question I have asked you before. I love you, Laurel Burkitt...always have, always will. Will you stay here and be this cowboy’s wife?”

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“YES!” she shouted. “I love you right back, Jaxson Hawkes.” He caught her in his arms in the nick of time to steady them both or they might have ended up in a pile of hay. The arms around his neck were not moving and he shifted his stance to lock his arms beneath her as her long legs encircled his middle. “Yes, cowboy, I am going to make you the best rancher’s wife slash media mogul that you ever saw. I can multitask with the best of them. And who wants boring? It’s highly overrated.”

Her luscious lips were so close to his that he could already taste their hint of strawberry gloss. Her eyes sparked fire as they met his. “Very true. Boring is definitely out.”

Her voice softened. “And this is for a lifetime contract, so don’t think you’ll be getting rid of me anytime in the next sixty years or so. You’re about to be stuck with me like glue, cowboy. Best hold on for the ride of your life.”

Their contract was sealed with a kiss then that made the horses turn heads. Laurel was home at last. It was right where it had always been waiting, in the arms of her cowboy, and Jaxson had the lady love of his life safe in his heart forever. Another Aces High legacy was just beginning.

Epilogue

“It is still coming down in buckets out there. The south fork of Rattlesnake Creek is two feet over the road and rising. The same with Palmer’s Branch Road. I’m calling the ranch and having Tom get the girls into the high-water truck and get them in here to town. I don’t want Sammi Jo stuck on the wrong side of all of this and being due in two weeks. That’s cutting it too close in my mind.” Beaudry was already out of his

seat in Coffee and a Chat, cell phone stuck to his ear. He stepped to a quieter spot among the tables of others, seeking a dry port in the early spring storm. While he and Jaxson had arrived in town earlier for a meeting with Matt, it was clear that the rain had only worsened.

“I don’t blame him for not wanting to take any chances when it comes to this unpredictable weather patterns of late.” Matt accepted another refill of his coffee and smiled his thanks at their waitress.

“Well, Laurel is keeping a keen eye on her sister, but last time we spoke, she sounded a bit concerned as well. The last thing I wanted was for her to attempt to strike out on her own to drive them into town in one of the pickups. So, Tom was a safer bet with the big water truck we use for fires. It’s still higher than the last reading from the main crossing and has the weight with it. But they need to move out now.” Jaxson’s voice was calm and steady as usual, but concern was evident in the lines of his body and the way his fingers gripped and ungripped the mug in front of him.

“Well, you Hawkes boys look out for your ladies, and that is as it should be. We need to see that Sammi Jo brings another fine strapping young Hawkes into the world. And we all know that Laurel and Lacy are tough and will get it done on their end. Besides, I’m looking forward to getting the baby here and then seeing your sorry bachelor carcass bite the dust. The confirmed bachelor met his match and went down in flames.”

Jaxson shook his head. “You just love saying that. And you know... it doesn’t bother me one bit. Go ahead... boast as to how you are the last lone wolf left of our trio. I’ll just smile and gladly give up my spot. Because one of these days, you are going to hit the same brick wall we all have. When that thing called love comes for you... you don’t stand a chance. Then Beau and I will just shake our heads and say, ‘we told you so.’ Mark my words.”

“Well, so far, I’ve sidestepped those arrows of cupids. That fat little fellow will have to speed up quite a bit to catch me.” Matt’s words were a lot of false bravado both Hawkes men were well acquainted with. They all pretty much knew that Matt Matteo had met his match a long while ago. But she had walked away, never to be seen in Burkitt again. And so far, no other female had come close to replacing the one that got away. Jaxson could understand the pain that went with an unrequited love. But he and Laurel had found their way to each other, and after they celebrated the birth of Jefferson Samuel Hawkes, he and Laurel would have their wedding.

Beaudry turned and strode toward the table, a frown and a genuine look of concern turning his usually passive features into dark ones. “They’re cut off. The crossing rose too high, too fast. Tom said it is even with the floor of the truck. He’s turned back to the house.”

“Okay. Tom’s got this. He did right not to chance that crossing. All is okay. They’ll be safe and okay in the house until the water goes down. There’s no emergency and Sammi Jo is okay. Laurel texted that they are going to fix some lunch and then she’ll see that her sister gets a nap. So, if everyone around her stays calm, then that is the best thing right now.”

Beaudry gave his brother a long look as he took his chair again. “So how did you get to be so smart about pregnant women?”

“I just equate it to one of our high-strung mares about to foal and how we handle them.”

Matt grinned. “Wait until I share with Sammi Jo how her brother-in-law compared her to a high-strung horse. This should be good.”

Jaxson didn’t smile. “Shouldn’t you go chase an ambulance or something? Get more business to keep you busy and in your office?”

Matt was nonplussed. “Sorry, wrong lawyer. That would be a personal injury attorney with the ambulance. I go after bad criminal types and rich crooks. With the occasional rancher needing expert legal advice tossed in the mix—present company included.”

“You both are not helping,” Beaudry reminded them. He had been glued to his phone. “The latest report is that this will get worse before it gets better.”

Jaxson’s phone rang. He answered but didn’t get very far into his greeting.

“Do what you need to do, and I will alert Tom with a plan. Take care, and we’ll get moving on our end. Love you.”

Beaudry sat still as stone. “What’s wrong? Is it Sammi Jo?”

Jaxson was pushing to his feet, his gaze meeting his brother’s. “We need to move this to a more private place like your office, Matt. And Laurel is on the phone with Dr. Damian at the hospital. Sammi Jo is okay right now. But she’s having some cramps that aren’t going away. Right now, we will see what the doctor says. He’ll be calling you when he hangs up with Laurel. Let’s go.”

The next twenty minutes felt like twenty years as far as Jaxson was concerned. He ached inside as he watched over his brother. Beaudry had moved into a deadly calm that had never boded well in the past. That usually meant he was strung as tight inside as a rubber band about to snap. But outwardly, he still functioned. He had to stay in control as he spoke to Sammi Jo and keep her away from the creeping fear on his side. The doctor was beginning to give options and speaking to Laurel about what she might need to do if things kept going as they were. And when Jaxson managed a quick call to Laurel while Beaudry was speaking with Sammi Jo on his phone, he could hear and feel the underlying concern bordering on controlled fear in her tone.

“You’ve got this, honey. You know what to do, and you’ll do it if the time comes. And we are working on a plan to get to you as we speak. Once we have it ready, we’ll let you know, but the doctor is on this and so are others. Hang in there.”

“Right. We can do this. No problem. Remind me to write all this down when it is over so I can pitch this in a script. I’ve always wanted to do a medical screenplay.”

“That’s my girl. Looking on the bright side—lemons into Laurel’s lemonade. Get back to your patient and I’ll get to mine.”

“Yours? What happened?”

“The father-to-be is my patient. So far, so good.”

Beaudry hung up from the doctor just as Jaxson ended his call. “Load up. We’re headed to the hospital.”

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“To the hospital?” Matt asked. “Shouldn’t we take along the expectant mother too?”

“The doctor has a plan, and the hospital is where they will bring Sammi Jo in, so he said we should be there. Or I should be there—you guys can stay here.”

“And miss this? Not on your life.” Matt rummaged in the bottom of his file cabinet as the others shrugged into raincoats again. He stood up in triumph, a bottle of champagne in his hand. “I’ve been saving this bottle for when our little man joined the party. Looks like it might be today. So best to be prepared is my motto.”

*

Dr. Damian and a nurse in blue scrubs waited at the desk when the elevator reached the fourth floor and opened to let the trio of men step off. Beaudry shook hands with the man, and they followed him into a private waiting room.

Jaxson glanced at the woman and then glanced again, this time at the nametag.

“When did you make it back home? Why didn’t we know before now?” Jaxson and the nurse shared a hug.

“Kenzie!” Beaudry said. “You’re Dr. Damian’s nurse? I thought Sammi Jo had said you came back from Dallas to work in the ER in the trauma unit at the hospital in Lubbock.”

“Partially correct, but a detour came along. We’ll sort it out later, but I’m here and, yes, I am going to be working with Dr. Damian on this case.”

The doctor nodded. “I just found out this morning when I consulted with emergency ops that Kenzie is related to you via marriage or some such. But she’s here because she is assigned to the answer to our problem, hopefully. Special ops include helicopters, and we believe we can get a chopper in the air during the next lull in the storm and get Sammi Jo back here. We need a pilot experienced in the arena of fast in-and-out procedures, and they have a new one that fits the bill along with the medical expertise. With flying not recommended—in fact, the rest of air flights are grounded right now—he volunteered and is using his own aircraft to handle it. This is a volunteer mission. Are you guys on board with this plan?”

“Sammi Jo says she is. And if you say this guy can get in there and get the job done, then we’re with you. And I want to go along,” Beaudry responded.

“That won’t be possible, as we are limited with room and there will be the pilot and Kenzie and the rest is the equipment that might be needed to get her and the baby, and the other two ladies away from the flood waters and in here. Kenzie, we need to get moving,” said a tall man in the bright-red flight suit and helmet who had entered the room behind them. They swung around to face him.

“Everyone, quick introductions,” the doctor said. “This is the pilot who volunteered his expertise and craft to go get Sammi Jo. Major Deacon Hayes.”

“Introductions will have to wait. I’ve a small window, so we’ve got to move.” He headed out the door he came in from. The others hadn’t any time to get a word or reaction in.

“It won’t do any good for me to tell you not to worry,” Kenzie said, her hand gently laid on Beaudry’s arm. “But we’ve got this. We’ll be back before you know it, cuz.” She grinned, then turned and headed down the hallway after the figure striding way ahead of her.

*

“We got this.” Six weeks later, Beaudry said those same words to Jaxson, as they stood together at the end of the aisle, under the glass cross window in the old stone church. Light from the setting sun made it possible for the light of the golden hour to filter down upon those gathered. The bride had wanted that moment for the ceremony. And Jaxson had timed it over and over to make certain the sun would be cooperating, and the weather and anything else, in order to give Laurel every moment of her dream for the perfect day.

A soft guitar played Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” and the bride followed a beaming Lacy down the aisle. A couple dozen special guests were gathered in the pews. Sammi Jo and little Jefferson sat on the front row along with Kenzie and Sean and CeeCee. Even Lucky made his presence known, guarding the newest addition to the family, staying close beside Sammi Jo and the baby. This time, the pup’s bow was white and sparkled.

Jaxson’s gaze didn’t find the other guest in attendance. That was a mystery that was only going to be unraveled in time. Once Sammi Jo had delivered a healthy six-pound, eleven-ounce son just minutes after the chopper had returned to the hospital, and everyone had rejoiced and emptied the bottle of the vintage champagne, both he and Beaudry went in search of the pilot who had managed to make a miracle happen. The baby had been breach, which would have made a home delivery by untrained people, notably Laurel, a nightmare and dangerous. It had been forestalled long enough for them to reach the landing pad. Jefferson would have quite the stories to tell in years to come.

Then Beaudry and Jaxson had found another shock when they searched out the pilot to thank him later that evening. It seemed that Jefferson wasn’t the only surprise Hawkes to make his presence known that day. Major Deacon Hayes had turned to them, sans helmet, familiar jade eyes meeting theirs. And a small birthmark below the man’s right ear caught Beaudry’s sharp eyes. He reacted first.

“I came to thank the man who saved my wife and son today. And why is it I have a

strange feeling that you aren't exactly the stranger we first thought? Are you?" It was more statement than question. Jaxson looked between the two men in confusion.

"In one way, you could say that," the major responded. "I suppose we are related. Although I had no idea about all of that until I heard the destination and that one of the Burkitts had married a Hawkes. So, yes, we share a mother. I came about from her affair with an army vet named Dallas Hayes. He drank himself off this earth a while back, after Mother disappeared, leaving us down in the valley on the border. But who cares about past family history on a day such as this?"

"Well, it seems we have some things to catch up on. Especially since the last we heard was that you had disappeared over in the Middle East a while back," Jaxson had begun, picking his way carefully in what felt like some minefields, judging by the look on Beaudry's face at the time. "But perhaps that can wait for better days when everyone is home and settled again. Just know that we owe you a debt that we take seriously. Thanks, doesn't cover it."

"It does for me. Just take care of your little family. That's thanks enough." The man had few words and he had said them, so he turned and soon disappeared around a corner. They had told Kenzie to bring him to the wedding, but that evidently hadn't panned out. That would have to wait until things settled a bit, but they needed to put that piece of family history in perspective. Except now was not the time for any other thoughts.

"Breathe," came the whispered directive from Beaudry into Jaxson's ear. How was that even possible? Laurel stood inside the door. The gold light fell about her like a spotlight. The ivory-lace gown flowed down her body and pooled into a natural train. The ivory satin of the waistband and the long ribbons that trailed from it matched the ribbon of the cascade of cream roses and bright wildflowers that suited the setting. A long veil of ivory lace, held in place by a pearl-encrusted clip, fell the length of the train. She looked like a fine porcelain angel walking toward him. His heart was bursting with pride and an encompassing feeling called love. Jaxson remembered

Sam Burkitt's words on that day so long ago and he had followed them.

He had set his dream, his heart, his love free to follow her own path, which led away from him... but not forever. She had returned to her home, to her heart... which she vowed had always remained with him.

Several hours later, Jaxson smiled down at the beautiful woman in his arms as they circled the dance floor at their reception. "Well, Mrs. Hawkes, it seems we have a bit of a quandary."

"Really? And what would that be?" Laurel felt like she had never smiled so much in her life. The utter joy inside her had no bounds. From the moment she had entered the old stone church and her gaze locked with Jaxson's, her heart felt ready to explode. Nothing else had ever matched the happiness of this moment, and she doubted anything ever could.

"There is a small matter of a bet we made. One that I made. Something about betting that you would be gone back to California before spring. And if I lost that bet, I would dance at your wedding. Well, I make note that I am paying off my losing bet. You stayed. And it is a bet that I am so grateful for losing."

Laurel slowly nodded. "That is true. I remember. But I was betting at one time that you would be married to another woman before Christmas. So, I suppose I technically lost it. And you never really agreed to it. So, it cancels out. Neither of us won."

Jaxson shook his head, his gaze warm on hers. "I beg to differ. I have married the lady of my dreams and she is staying right here in this cowboy's arms. That makes me the winner of the jackpot."

"I'll agree to that if we just call it a draw. This lady is indeed right where I was always meant to be... home in Texas on the Aces High, with my cowboy."

The End