



# The Texas Cowboy's Proposal

**Author:** *Debra Holt*

**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** They had a foolproof plan...until one little girl got involved.

Sammi Jo Burkitt's formidable grandmother's will is pushing Sammi Jo to the brink. Yes, the feisty cowgirl can keep the ranching empire known as Aces High, which has been the family birthright for two centuries, but she must marry her rival and stay married for three years as part of the deal. Say no, and Aces High goes on the auction block. Beaudry Hawkes wants nothing to do with the high and mighty Burkitts. Until the day Sammi Jo shows up on his doorstep with a proposition no one in their right mind would refuse: wear her ring, then accept thousands of acres of rich ranch land and a tidy sum of three million dollars when they part ways. The windfall could change everything for his daughter's future. But eight-year-old Lacy is becoming attached to the idea of one happy family. Nothing short of a true marriage between the two can make her dreams come true. Can Sammi Jo and Beaudry find their freedom and love too?

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

## Chapter One

“You can’t sell this ranch. It’s our heritage, our family’s legacy.”

The words were both a defensive stance and a helpless plea from her soul. The news her sister Laurel had just handed to her sent Sammi Jo’s heart plummeting inside her chest. They sat side by side, their gazes sweeping across the vast space before them. Yet Sammi Jo knew they were seeing two different worlds.

As far as one could see in any direction were the wide-open spaces opined in many a Texas song and legend. The Burkitt brand was on every gate, vehicle, animal, and even clothing the humans wore. The land they stood upon had been fought over and protected for generations before them over the last two hundred-plus years. And now there was another battle looming just beyond the distant horizon. Sammi Jo had just come face-to-face with a stark reality.

“Times change.” Laurel made the blunt statement. “Grandmother always said that you better keep a fast horse at the ready. You never knew what or who you might have to outrace next. In this case, it’s pure economics.”

“That’s a cold assessment of the last two hundred years of the Burkitt family’s footprints on this land. Strangers don’t belong on this ground...we do. They haven’t earned it. What do you think Grandmother would think?”

“This was entirely her idea. And in her usual way, she left the delivery of the news up to me. I arrived out of the womb and on this land ahead of you by four minutes. That puts me in this unwanted position. And she knew I would have a more hard-nosed

business sense than you would about this subject. You're the one who has a heart the size of Texas and would want to keep every animal on this place and every cowboy and..."

"Our animals can't go to a slaughterhouse. Some of their bloodlines date back a century or more, from the days of the conquistadors from Spain. And those cowboys you refer to have been born here on this ranch and their fathers before them and even grandfathers. Their families don't know any other home, any other way of life. They gave their blood, sweat, and tears for this land... for our family. We owe them more than just a severance check and a goodbye party."

"Then what would you have me do? I've got two offers on the table, both worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Not even a fool would walk away from that sweet of a deal. But if you want this place so much, buy me out. Take over. You have a trust fund. I'll even take payments on the balance. I trust you and your credit rating." Laurel was trying to add a touch of levity, but it was a no go.

Sammi Jo was stunned into a brief silence while her sister's words sank into her brain. She aimed her gaze at her. "You'd do that? Make a deal with me to buy you out? Why?"

"Because I'm an idiot. Or a soft-hearted sucker, after all. Or maybe I think you might be the last true Burkitt. You just may have that strain of blood or genes or whatever it takes to get this place into the next century. And our grandmother did have a contingency plan just in case I found a soft spot in my heart—or head. Consider it Grandmother hedging her bets, as usual. Along with her odd way of making a right to an old wrong."

"What does that mean? What did Grandmother do?"

"If you had strong objections to selling out, she gave me the leeway to make you a

deal... with one provision. And that is why I haven't brought it up before now. Because I really don't want to see you go ballistic. And this could be a disaster in the making. Or maybe I just don't want to see my little sister hurt."

"Well, you've come too far to stop now. Spit it out."

"I don't think I'll be spitting anything out. It'll be you."

"Details, Laurie." She used the nickname that few dared in her sister's presence.

"I can make this deal with you if you agree to the terms—all of them. No discussion. It is a yes or a no. And then the deal is off the table for good. This place is sold to the highest bidder."

"A foreign conglomerate that doesn't give a damn about anything but profits and cutting up pieces of this country and..." Sammi Jo's blood pressure was rising, but before it got to the danger zone, Laurel raised her palm.

"Please. I have heard this all before. Save it to preach elsewhere. You just might need that sermon and voracity for someone else if you seriously contemplate taking me up on this."

"I'm listening."

"You make the down payment in thirty days to me. And you make the rest of the payments each quarter over the next ten years."

Sammi didn't hesitate. "That is possible. Between the trust fund, hard work, and trusting Mother Nature to help out when I need it, the horse stock, and the—"

"The producing oil and gas wells are where I see those dollars coming from in case

dear old Mother Nature fails,” Laurel interjected. “That leaves you relying on politicians and the global economy. I don’t know which is the worst trade-off. But it will indeed be work. I know you like that sort of thing. But what you won’t like is that little fine print in the deal. A potential deal breaker if there ever was one.”

“Our grandmother loved her fine print. She spoke with you about this? This was all her idea?”

“It was more of her wish. The attorneys had this tidy little codicil to go along with the will. You know she always wanted to have a grandson to leave all of this to one day, and if she could find a way to lay to rest any traces of that old feud from the bygone days at the same time, that would have made her even more determined. For whatever reasons, she wanted to make amends.”

But the Burkitt heirs were born without the correct genitalia. Just more females when all grandmother wanted was a tough male heir. She even hoped for a while that one of Aunt Naomi’s children might be a male. But cousins Kenzie and MacKenna blew that hope out of the water when they were born. MacKenna left the ranch as fast as she could after graduation. And Kenzie seemed determined to make medicine her calling. But Grandmother did do right by them both in her will. Everyone knew the cousins were left some very lucrative pieces of land bordering the Crazy Coyote River over in the west section of the ranch. And Aunt Naomi was given a nice sum of cash that would make life in Florida with her new husband much more enjoyable.

“And where do we conjure up a male bloodline in all of this?”

“Seems she chose a way to right an old family wrong and gain that strong male in the family all at the same time, at least to her way of thinking. And she gets to make the selection. The solution is you marry one. And not just any old male will do. No, she even picked that one out for you herself, since she knew she couldn’t get you to see the straight of it in the time she had left. She killed two birds with one stone if you

will. Always the one to cut to the bottom line.”

“What old wrong? Not that ridiculous old feud over a game of cards? And whyme? And marriage? Had she totally gone off the deep end?”

Laurie rose to her feet and kicked a stone out of the way with the toe of one designer boot. She turned to face Sammi Jo. “She was pretty cryptic about the old wrong bit. At first, I thought it might be from the meds and painkillers clouding her brain. But she was sharp to the end. The attorneys had that verified. All she or her attorneys would say was ‘It’s time for the reckoning. Time for the Burkitts to right the wrong.’ So if you want a chance to have all of this to continue in this family, you will sacrifice not just a lot of your trust fund for it but also the rest of your life... or the next three years, at any rate. If you’ve met the financial obligations to that point, there is an escape clause: you can have a divorce with a strong pre-nup in place, of course. She even drew that up with the attorneys herself. Nothing was left to chance or something as fickle as romance, Heaven forbid.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Sammi Jo slowly shook her head. “I can’t believe this—but then, yes, I can. This sounds like her shenanigans. She’s still ruling our lives from beyond the grave. Why didn’t she just say this before she died and caused all of this uproar now?”

“Because she loved the uproar. You know that. Sarah McNamara Burkitt was the grande dame of all she surveyed. People were to be moved around the chessboard as her pawns. Do you think she was going to stop doing that even in death? She could give and she could take away. And while she did divvy out her love to us after our parents died, she did so with an eye to the future. She knew I never took to this place, not like you did. You followed in her shadow every step she took. I loved ball gowns and you loved muddy jeans. You loved forecasting beef prices, I loved eating a good steak in a fine restaurant. That’s why I am off to California and bright lights and you are—well, that is up to you. Do you want to stay on this land and go along with her last hoorah at being in control of our destiny?”

“You haven’t said who she chose. Which man is to be the sacrificial lamb in all of this? Does he even know about any of this?”

“Beaudry Hawkes.”

Silence. Only the Texas breeze daring to murmur through the grasses at their feet. A stunned silence and then a slow burn to a volcanic eruption as Sammi Jo found her footing beside her sister, hands on hips in a fighting stance. “Beau Hawkes?! Was she insane? We’re related! What was she thinking? Did the attorneys really test her for senility or whatever before they allowed all of this in her last will?”

“First of all, insane? No. Not in the clinical sense. Maniacal mostly, devious definitely.

But she had to be to run a ranch that is larger than most any three states put together and then some. And related? Like something a million years ago. Her great-grandmother or some such fell for this itinerate gambler in the Hawkes' gene pool, but that long since thinned out of the bloodlines. Besides, you aren't planning on offspring, are you?"

"Not Beaudry Hawkes."

"Hmmm, I seem to recall that you had this major Texas-sized crush on the man for all your teen years. But then he up and married that Cindy Lou... Cindy Ray... something Cindy. That didn't last long though. So, he is all yours now if you want him."

"It was Sandy Louise Betancourt. She was running around on him the whole time he was in the military. Then they got married and she went right back to old habits while he finished college. He was lucky to get rid of her. And she not only left him but their little girl too."

"Wow. I forgot there was a kid involved. Make sure that's covered by your attorneys when they draw up the final pre-nup. No loose ends—something Grandmother taught us well, alongside good hygiene and don't play in the finger bowls."

"I doubt there will be any need for attorneys because I am fairly certain that Beaudry Hawkes is going to order me off his land the minute he sees my truck pass through his gate. We might not have had the best of relationships the last couple of years."

"Then you need to start packing. Because this land and that house will be going to a new owner, and I am sure they won't consider you as part of the bargain. Unless you can hire on as a cowhand or something? But then again, if they plan to subdivide or do something else like that, there won't be any Aces High Ranch to worry about." Her sister's open arms brought her in for a hug. "I have a plane to catch, but you know how to reach me. I'll give you twenty-four hours to make a decision. Then I



will tell the lawyers to put up the Sold sign on the front gate.”

\*

Twenty-four hours. The clock was ticking on her life. That wasn't being dramatic. That was stating a simple and hard fact. Her sister had taken off for the West Coast in the ranch's plane, which left Sammi Jo to do some fast contemplation of her own life. And just as determined as her sister was to grab hold of her life, so was she. The only life she had ever envisioned was within the confines of 600,000-plus acres of prime ranchland she had thought would always be home.

Until the world upended itself with her grandmother's help and now she was sitting on the side of a country road, alone in her pickup, contemplating the tall iron gate that led to her only hope. Only hope...could be the title of a sad country song if she had any talent for writing music instead of just being a rancher. And a rancher about to lose the only way of life she had ever known or wanted.

Sammi Jo still remembered how she felt the day she and Laurel arrived at the gates to Aces High. Their parents had been buried in Dallas, after the helicopter they had hired to visit a glacier on their second honeymoon had crashed. That left the young pair to be packed off to the ranch. Sammi Jo had taken longer than Laurel to get used to the change. The house was huge and terrified her. Their grandmother had immediately separated the pair, who had shared a room for the first six years of their lives. Sammi Jo found herself hiding under the covers of a huge bed, a wicked-sounding wind banging the outside shutters, and no one to call out to in the darkness. Not after her grandmother had shown her to her suite of rooms and told her that she needed to grow up and realize that crying was a huge waste of time and never permitted on the Aces High or in her sight. Somehow, Sammi Jo had the feeling that the woman knew each and every time those first months when she would sneak off to one of the grain rooms in the stables and let the tears fall.

And during her teen years, she'd often wondered if her grandmother took some perverse pleasure in placing her in situations that would test that rule. Such as when the mongrel dog she had latched onto not long after arriving at the ranch had been given away to another ranch without any warning and Sammi Jo had been ordered to place the animal in its crate and help load it. The woman had watched for signs of tears, but Sammi Jo had begun learning how to choke them down. Grandmother had remarked that bloodlines mattered to people like Burkitts. There needed to be only the finest horseflesh in their stables, the best equipment in their barns, the best of everything, because people expected it of them. So, no mixed-breed dog was needed.

And then the day had come, a year or so after that, when her grandmother had made her stay in the barn and watch one of the young colts she had taken a liking to be put down over a leg injury. That rendered the animal imperfect and, therefore, useless. Sammi Jo learned each and every lesson the woman had thrown at her. Now, she had been given the final test. Lose everything she loved or fight for it under the rules her grandmother was still calling. She drew in a deep breath and expelled it.

The solid gate had not moved. The silent road was still there.

It led to a man she had last seen more than two years ago. There had been a minor dispute over one of her cows getting mixed in with his prize bulls, and they had ended up in a shouting match on the side of a stock pond. She had been in the process of telling that full-of-himself cowboy what he could do with his bulls when her foot had slipped on the muddy ground, and the next thing she knew, she had pushed away the hand he shot out to grab her. And in doing so, he, not her, had lost his footing and ended up face first in the muddy pond.

By the time he had managed to find his footing and stand, she was on her horse and yelling orders to her cowhands to get their cattle moving. She hadn't looked back, nor had she offered an apology of any type. Not her finest moment. But there had been a not-so-finer moment before that day—and in front of a much larger audience.

It had involved the woman he had ended up marrying, Sandy Lou, as she was known in the town. It was the final round of the ranch horse competition at the Fort Worth Stock Show. For the first time, Sammi Jo had an actual chance of winning the gold buckle, and besting Beaudry Hawkes in the arena. Her horse, Comet, was doing an outstanding job going into the final round. Laurie should have known that something was up when Sandy Lou made certain to be by the gate as Sammi Jo entered, smiling her simpering little sneer, and even wishing her good luck. Beaudry had been sitting on his mount, waiting his turn after Sammi Jo's. He didn't see Sandy's sneer. He sat in silence with that gaze that always could make Sammi Jo go all bumfuzzled in her brain and feel lesser than under his gaze.

She put them both out of her thoughts as she moved Comet into the ring where the judges were waiting. And then all hell broke loose. Comet began sidestepping and flinging his head side to side. Sammi Jo was taken totally unawares, and she tried to maintain control and settle him down. But he was having none of it, and when his hind feet hit the ground, Sammi Jo parted ways with his back and ended up in the arena dirt on her own backside, shocked into speechlessness. A collective gasp swept over the assembled full house of spectators in the stands.

While others ran into the arena to gain control of the animal, she brushed off the offered hands, embarrassment filling her. Never in all her years of riding had any horse ever managed to unseat her. But now she sat looking up at the cowboy whose hand was in her line of sight, and it had to be Beaudry Hawkes. That compounded it all for her. She scrambled to her feet, knocking his hand away. She managed a slight nod of apology toward the judges as she left the arena, trailing behind her horse who was being led away toward his stall by two wranglers, still not quite settled.

The vet was waiting for them, and once inside the stall, Sammi Jo tried to calm Comet, rubbing his broad nose and using soothing words while the vet began looking him over. And once the saddle came off, then the blanket, the horse calmed.

“Well, here is the culprit. Did you check your blanket before you placed it on his back, Miss Sammi?” She gasped. A huge, angry, barbed cocklebur lay on his gloved hand, its long spikes meaning business to any flesh it connected with. “No wonder this fellow wasn’t having a good day once the weight began stabbing this into his back. Can’t imagine how that got under his blanket.” The vet was shaking his head.

But then Sammi Jo caught sight of a certain blond who had come to stand a few feet outside the stable doorway. And before she turned away, she flashed another smile at Sammi Jo that said all she needed to say about her part in the whole episode. Any other place, Sammi Jo would have gone at the woman full force for inflicting pain on one of her animals. But she remembered where they were and the crowd of other ranchers and spectators in the area. She would bide her time.

And that time had come less than a month later at the Ranchers’ Ball when she entered the civic center’s ballroom at the same time Sandy was exiting on the arm of her newly announced fiancé, Beaudry Hawkes. Sammi Jo had seen red and confronted the woman, who managed to pull off a perfect simpering “poor me” façade in front of the man who had bought into it hook, line, and sinker. He had asked no questions, just told Sammi Jo that she was acting like the spoiled, rich brat she was, and she owed Sandy an apology, as she wasn’t to blame for Sammi Jo’s horse not being ready for the show ring. Sammi Jo had then told him in colorful words where he and his fiancée could both go straight to. Not her finest of moments, and that was why she knew the odds were now in favor that he would tell her exactly what she could do with her request for his help. And she would have only herself and her temper to blame.

But Sammi Jo had to try. The fighting Burkitt spirit had burned brightly within her as far back as she could remember. She was walking by her first birthday and riding a horse by two, with someone holding her in the saddle, whenever they had visited the ranch. By six, she was living on the ranch and she was the one holding the reins and following along in that shadow of her grandmother. They had been known as Big

Missy and Little Missy around the ranch and town. Sammi Jo had learned all she could from the woman... good and bad. Her grandfather had been the one to supply the kindness of heart and speech in her world. Meanwhile, she tried to please the woman, just as everyone else did. A lot of good it had done her. She stood to be left out in the cold... unless she could persuade Beaudry to see things her way.

The Hawkes brothers, Beaudry, and his older brother, Jaxson, lived on their ranch that was a strip of some 10,000 acres cut into the southern side of the Aces High. Long before any of them had been born, the Hawkes had been partners in a cattle operation with a Burkitt. And as the Burkitt operation grew, the Hawkes were basically pushed out of the original dealings, with the coup de grace a losing hand in a poker game between a Hawkes and a Burkitt. Hawkes had claimed cheating and a duel had ensued. The Burkitts had come out on top. That bad blood persisted for a few generations.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Then her grandfather, Samuel Burkitt, had set out to right a wrong. He offered Jaxson, and later Beaudry, jobs at the Aces High Ranch, and by the time Samuel had died, Jaxson was his foreman of ranch operations. Everyone knew that the man thought of Jaxson as the son he wished he had. Beaudry left for a military stint and then came back to run the day-to-day of the Hawkes ranch. He had made a name for himself with his prize ranch horses and had bested the Aces High's showings on more than a few occasions. That was added to the long list of items that served to grate on her about the man, on top of the more personal reasons involving his ex.

Bury it deep and do what you need to do. Her grandmother had shared that pearl of wisdom with her from a very young age. Now that thought fueled her steps to slide out of the truck at the end of the sidewalk. It led to a gate with a low stone wall around the plot of a tree-covered hillside where the natural stone house sat under huge oak- and pecan trees. The green grass of the yard looked lush and healthy, and she had an urge to take off her boots and let her bare toes revel in it. It was an oasis that caught at her, and the single swing being pushed back and forth in the gentle breeze of the early afternoon brought an urge to sit a spell and close her eyes in a daydream. But she needed to keep her eyes wide open in the current nightmare where she walked.

The squeaking of a screened-porch door brought her back to reality. She looked up to find a little girl with twin ponytails trailing over her small shoulders, dressed in denim overalls and a red T-shirt, who had come to stand on the bottom step, her gaze interested, yet watchful. And then next to her appeared one of the most massive dogs Sammi Jo had ever seen. He was every bit as tall as the little girl whose hand reached over and buried itself in the thick, white fur of his shoulder. The child's head tilted a bit as she looked at their visitor.

“This is Beast. That’s his scary name. I’m supposed to call him that when strangers are around. But I don’t think he scares you. You’re awfully pretty. What’s your name?”

“Samantha Josefina Burkitt,” said a tall man on her behalf who had come around the side of the house without being noticed. His voice was low and deep and well-remembered. As were the dark-jade eyes snapping their silent bold regard upon her. The jawline was set against an intruder. She supposed that was what she was in that moment. Sammi Jo certainly had not been invited. She wiped her sweaty palms along the denim fabric of her hips before her hands slid inside the pockets of her jacket to calm her nerves.

“That’s a long name. Mine is small. I’m Lacy Ann Hawkes.”

“It’s small, but it is very pretty. And people usually call me Sammi Jo. The other way is too fancy for me.” She and the little girl exchanged smiles.

But the cowboy drew her attention to where he had moved to stand, just to the other side of the closed iron gate, a silent reminder of the chasm between them. “Run finish your chores in the laundry room, Lacy. This lady is about to leave.”

He tossed the words over his shoulder while his gaze stayed riveted on Sammi Jo. The cotton material of his long-sleeved shirt had been rolled up to elbow length, and bare muscled arms moved to cross over his chest. His feet were planted in a protective stance.

“Yes, sir. Bye, Miss Sammi Jo.” She gave a small nod before turning to leave them alone, the Beast trailing right behind her.

Beaudry Hawkes’s silent regard hadn’t changed in its power to hold Sammi Jo still and was even more unnerving in the present circumstance. No way was he making

anything easy for her. Except for making her feel her welcome was over even before it had been extended.

Now or never. "I'm here because I have some business to discuss with you. Very important business."

His gaze didn't waver. "I can't think of anything we have to discuss. And I only talk business in my office when people make appointments. That includes a Burkitt. Appears you came out here for nothing." He went to turn away.

"I need to talk to you today, and it can't wait. And if you'll hear me out, you just might find it's your lucky day that I came here at all."

The look he shot her told her that he highly doubted that last remark. After a few long seconds, he exhaled a deep breath from within him.

"I trust my gut. And my gut is telling me that luck is not what I might describe it as. But I also have a feeling you aren't going to go away until you've said your piece. So, do it. You have one minute, and the clock is ticking right now."

"I need less than that. Bottom line is my grandmother screwed me in her will. If I have any hope of keeping my home and the Aces High intact, I have to get married to the one person she decreed I have to marry and stick it out with for three years. That person is you, and God only knows the reason. Her lawyers have papers that will give you fifty thousand more acres of land, free and clear, and a boatload of cash for your cooperation. I need you to meet me at the courthouse at 4:00 p.m. tomorrow, and we can get it all done and legal. Then you have your life and I have mine. Is that fast enough for you?"

## Chapter Two



Fast enough? Her words had come out like rapid rifle fire. Then she had turned and walked back to her truck, slammed the door to punctuate her feelings on the matter at hand, and left a cloud of dust in her wake. Beaudry had stood there like a statue. Only now was he moving. Leaving Lacy under the watchful eyes of Serafina, their housekeeper, he had left his own cloud of dust behind as he navigated the ranch road and then the blacktopped highway to end up in downtown Burkitt, his eyes locking on the familiar white truck with the Aces High logo on its door. It was backed up to a loading dock at the Burkitt Feed and Seed. Jaxson, his eldest brother, was signing off on the invoicing but looked up as Beaudry landed in an open space beside him, the gears grinding into park and his door slamming to announce his entrance.

“Is there a fire I don’t know about?” Jaxson’s shoulders relaxed into their usual ‘I’m ready for the trouble, whatever it is’ posture that seemed to be his normal stance of late.

“There’s about to be an eruption hotter than any hellfire,” Beaudry spit out the words between clinched teeth.

“So, I’m thinking we need to step inside Dawson’s and find a quiet corner rather than here on the main street. Let’s go.” He didn’t wait for Beaudry to follow. He had said what they were doing and that was enough.

Dawson’s Gastronomic Eatery and Saloon was housed in one of the oldest buildings in Burkitt, with a cornerstone dated back to the 1860s. With its eighteen-foot ceilings, carved wood trimming, and thick masonry walls, it provided respite from hot summers and warmth from freezing winters with its three roaring fireplaces too. It was filled with plants and animal heads, rowboats trailing white twinkling lights in an imaginary wake of sorts suspended from the ceiling, mirrors in all shapes and sizes behind the super long, highly polished teakwood bar that was the original bar when the saloon first served thirsty trail drivers from the south, cavalry soldiers from the north, myriad ranchers and farmers, and all sorts of in-betweens. But while the name

was long enough to fit the sign over the entire length of the building outside, above the floor-to-ceiling windows, it was simply known by those far and near as Dawson's.

The brothers moved from the front dining area favorited by those who wanted to see and be seen by those moving along the sidewalks outside and chose the inner dining area where conversations could be had in comparative quiet.

Jaxson chose a table for two in the far corner of the room. He nodded at one of the waitresses, who held up a tea pitcher. Two fingers indicated two glasses would be needed. He chose his seat, pushed his hat back on his forehead, and waited. The tea came in tall, Texas-sized glasses with lots of ice. Once the pleasantries had been exchanged with Ruby, their waitress, and he had taken a long gulp of the tea, he settled his attention on Beaudry.

"Speak. What's got you riled this time?"

"Damn woman."

"It's a female, I'm guessing, then," Jaxson countered. "So, what has your ex done now? More legal threats about visitation with Lacy?"

"No, not that one."

"Well, then. I am glad to see there might still be hope for your sorry bachelor self if you have made an acquaintance of some female outside your household. This is a positive step."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“She comes to my front door, pronounces that we have to get married, and then leaves again. Who does she think she is?”

“Whoa!” Jaxson sat up straighter in his chair, the smile leaving his face. “Just back up. I didn’t know we were moving that fast. So you’ve known this woman how long? And she tells you that you have to marry her. How far along is she? Are you sure this baby is—?”

“Baby?! What the blazes are you talking about? I wouldn’t dare touch her in that way. Not that scheming, rich, spoiled...”

“Hold it.” Jaxson’s voice was firm, and his palm added to it. “There seems to be a few pieces missing here. Step one, who is the ‘she’ we are so all-fired angry about? And two, just how rich is this lady? That might be something to consider in all of this. And three, there is no baby, correct?”

Beau took a couple of long swigs of his own glass. He shook his head. “Try to keep up, big brother. First, she is a little redheaded firebrand, last name of Burkitt.”

“Well, then, that explains a lot. But I wasn’t aware that the two of you were anywhere near speaking terms.”

“Neither was I. And I was very happy to stay in that blissful state of silence for the rest of my life. But she comes roaring onto our property, tells me, mind you—no asking with please and thank you’s; nope, no manners needed—that her grandmother left some sort of diabolical will that says she has to marry or lose the ranch. And the best part is that her grandmother chose me—me!—as the unlucky candidate. Who

does such ridiculous decrees in this century? Sarah Burkitt does not own me and never will.” And with that last bit of news, Beaudry sank back in his chair, eyes clinched shut, shoulders slumped.

Jaxson was silent for a moment, contemplation knitting his brow where his hat usually covered. “So Big Missy left Little Missy in a mess. Figures. She always had to leave a hurricane behind her wherever she went. I’ve heard rumors for the last few weeks that something hinky was happening with the will, but I never pay them no mind. Not until it becomes a truth. So why would she want you, of all people, to marry her youngest granddaughter?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? I’d think you working for them would be enough to settle things, but no. She spouted something about the deal being sweet for me with fifty thousand acres free and clear and a boatload of cash to go through with it for just three years. Then I can have my freedom. All tied up with a pretty bow and the Burkitt lawyers. Then she orders me to be at the courthouse tomorrow at 4:00 p.m. for the wedding. She has lost her mind.”

Jaxson sat up straighter. His brain was clearly operating on all cylinders for a few long moments. “Well, don’t discount any mind loss on the other’s part. It is where yours—ours—is from this point onward that matters.”

When Jaxson got that certain “thinking” look in his eyes, it could bode well or not so well, but something was always about to happen.

“You do understand that there is not a snowball’s chance in Hades of me going anywhere near a preacher with that woman? Just because she is a Burkitt who likes to say, ‘Jump’ and others are crazy enough to say, ‘How high, Your Majesty?’ doesn’t mean I am one of them.”

“For fifty thousand acres free and clear and the money to settle debts on our ranch for

a long time to come, you better believe that we will sit still and consider all parts of this before you go off on your own high horse. For whatever reason, Sarah Burkitt had a plan. And we need to figure out what that was. In order to do that, we need more information. Which we probably would have if you hadn't been your usual 'act first and think next' self and ordered Sammi Jo off the ranch without more facts."

"You're telling me you would have done any different?"

"I would have engaged my brain first, so yes, I would have done different. Now we are going to go over to Matt's office and see what he might find out, lawyer to lawyer, on what this is all about. No matter what this turns out to be, it's going to be with a good deal of legal advice on our side, not just the Burkitts' legal team running roughshod over this. That is step one." Jaxson took one last draining gulp from his glass and pushed out of his seat.

Beaudry followed in swift strides.

\*

"Just when I thought this was going to be one of those long, hot summers where I needed to spend more time down in the Caribbean at my little beach shack, here come the Hawkes boys into my office and blow that idea out of the water." Matthew "Matt" Mateo was an attorney and rancher by trade, a former local football star beside both the Hawkes boys in high school, and the county's number one marital catch among the ladies, if gossip was to be believed around the courthouse square and local watering holes.

His brown leather chair creaked as he adjusted his seating and removed the hand-tooled Tony Lamas from their perch on the corner of his desk back to the floor before he rested his arms on top of his desk and eyed them.

“I had heard that Big Missy’s will is going to be a barn burner of a read once it’s public fodder. Her attorneys are keeping it close to their vests right now. But I can certainly give them a call and see what is what in all of this romantic mystery, as your legal adviser. Particularly since the lady in question has already set the wedding date and time.”

“There’s nothing romantic about any of it. If anything, it’s a sick joke. The idea that Sarah Burkitt can control anything to do with my life, much less anyone else’s, stopped when she was buried. But someone forgot to tell her that.” Beaudry’s level of calm was still a mite high in comparison to his brother’s.

“We appreciate you taking this on, Matt. There’s not a lot of time, judging by the 4:00 p.m. deadline tomorrow. And this could also prove to have some sort of impact on our present ranch if someone comes along and buys up the Aces High and does things to change agreements we have in place for water rights and rights-of-way to property. Not to mention how it might impact my employment as the head foreman. There are many things to think about.” Jaxson was the pragmatic one of the family.

Beaudry shook his head. “Deadlines can come and go. Does anyone remember that I have a daughter to raise? What about her? She’s already dealing with one absent mother in her life. I guess a kid wouldn’t figure into a Burkitt’s thinking. Just excess baggage. How would you explain that a woman she just laid eyes on today is going to be her new mom tomorrow? But don’t get attached because it’s only for three years, then she’ll be gone too.”

Matt stood, sincere concern in his gaze. “No one is about to forget Lacy in any of this. I intend to find out all I can and then get back to you. Trust me to do that. Nothing can be decided until you have more facts. So you get back to your work and let me do mine. That’s the game plan for now.”

\*

“Ironclad. That isn’t the word I wanted to hear used with this mess.” A few more expletives flew alongside the pitchfork as it sailed across the empty stall and landed with a loud thud against the far wall. Jaxson and Matt should be grateful they stood outside the work area where they had found a sweat-drenched Beaudry, sans shirt, pushing himself to the limit with every energy-expending job he could find as he waited for the news. “This is sure as hell not the news I had hoped to hear from your mouth after you contacted the Burkitt attorneys. So that’s it? But the bottom line is, I can refuse and be done with all of this, right? And Samantha Jo Burkitt can just fly off this land in her little jet and never darken my doorstep again?”

“Sure, that can happen.” It was Jaxson who spoke up. “There’d be no more Burkitts on this land. I’d be at the mercy of whatever conglomerate anted up the few hundred million. Rumor has it the highest bidder interested is a group of Greeks wanting a place to play cowboy on weekend jaunts and empty the oil wells at the same time. Then they’ll leave it high and dry to blow away in the spring storms. Not on my watch. Samuel Burkitt trusted me to keep watch over the Aces High. I won’t stick around to watch it wither and die like so many other of the great ranches have done in this state, mostly due to the cold greed of those wanting a fast buck and no sweat as collateral. I had that job offer last year from that spread up in Canada. I’ll give them a call. And you can manage our land here just as you’ve been doing. Nothing will need to change.”

Beaudry didn’t care for the way his gut felt as his brother’s words fell like stones in the heavy air of the barn. Nothing will change. Right. Everything had changed in the blink of an eye.

“You hate the cold. The first six-foot snow and you’ll be done.”

Neither Matt nor his brother had a comeback for him. The silence was deafening and more telling than the unspoken words. Beaudry reached for his shirt laying over the stall gate. He shrugged it on and began to slowly button it. A long breath laced with

something akin to defeat escaped him.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“If it’s any use, I did find out that the time limit isn’t set in stone. You wouldn’t necessarily have to get married tomorrow. You’d sign off on an agreement and then you’d have thirty days to get the deed done. Just thought I’d pitch that out there.”

Matt’s words brought Beaudry’s mind back into focus. “Thirty days? Then there would have to be a marriage or...?”

“Then the deal is off and the ranch is sold.”

“Why do I since abutin there someplace? What happens to the deal—the ranch land and the cash? Which is how much, by the way? I guess aboatloadof cash was an exaggeration also?”

“Only if you consider three million an exaggeration.”

The silence became a loud roar. Beaudry’s shocked gaze met his brother’s. Both brothers almost forgot to take a breath. Jaxson recovered quickest.

“A million for each of the three years of incarceration?”

“Nicely put.” Matt nodded, a hint of arrogant smile playing into view. “Not bad for simply saying ‘I do’ and slipping a gold band on your finger for a little while. But then again, who knows? You might end up liking the arrangement so much you’ll want to make it permanent. Could be worse things than being married to a beautiful, wealthy woman. I just can’t think of what those worse things are at the moment.”

“Well, I can. A gold ring is nothing but a gold noose around a man’s neck. And I

know all about that. But I also know that this can change a lot of things for our lives and our own ranch, all the plans that would take us decades to put in place, if even then. Building up the horse herd, bringing in more land for pasture grazing. And the things it could provide for Lacy's future, like a college education and something of value to inherit one day, instead of a mound of debt. I just have to do some thinking."

The two men watched as Beaudry saddled up his horse. He did his best thinking on the back of his horse, somewhere in the middle of the land where the silence and vastness often revealed answers that couldn't be heard anyplace else.

"Best let him think it out. Thanks for postponing your plans. Guess you'll be heading for that quiet beach and blue waters now," Jaxson said to Matt.

Matt shook his head. "One thing is for certain. I won't be going on any trip. I think things just might get interesting around here. I always enjoy a good fireworks show."

### Chapter Three

Sammi Jo sat still as a statue on the back of her black-and-white paint horse. The animal's gaze was also locked on the moving figure in the distance headed in their direction. From where they stood waiting under the lone massive oak tree on the crest of the hill, they had a vantage point that gave them a clear view for as far as they could see of the open ranch land in every direction stretching before them. It was Sammi Jo's private place to ponder the questions of the universe, as her sister often chided her. The Lightning Tree was the name given to the huge oak tree that had been hit by lightning one summer afternoon when Sammi Jo was just ten. It had split in two and been stripped of its leaves, its bark bleached white, leaving an eerie look to it. Some believed it had special magic, and Sammi Jo liked to believe that as a child. Except she was fervently hoping there might be some truth in that at the moment. She needed magical answers and she needed them fast. She sat waiting for the answer that approached now in the figure of a cowboy as his mount picked its way up the slope.

The horse was a big bay. The size fit the man on his back.

Beaudry Hawkes had called and left a terse message on her phone. We need to talk. Meet me at the lightning tree... one hour.

Sammi Jo didn't usually take to being summoned. But then, there would be a lot of things she hadn't done before if this ridiculous plan were to be put into place. Her life would be upended for the next three years. But she'd walk through a cactus field infested with rattlers if she had to in order to keep the land before her under the Burkitt name. Whatever game her grandmother was playing, she'd match it, or she didn't deserve to have this future.

As much as she begrudged the thought, one had to admire Beaudry Hawkes's skills as a horseman. It was easy but commanding. He had formed that innate partnership with his mount. It came from years of work and trust. She knew it because she had done the same. Two hearts and minds working as one. That was how her grandmother had explained it to her when she had begun putting her into the saddle. It had taken Sammi Jo a while to grasp the real meaning and then put it into action. But the day it clicked for her—that was the day she had gotten the silent nod of approval from the woman... and that was as good as a real queen bestowing an honor on a subject before her. They were few and far between.

Beaudry and she had competed often enough against each other in the show arena. They were dead even in the number of trophies and ribbons. But even didn't count, not in the world of being a Burkitt. Except now, she needed him in order to gain what she desired the most. And that would allow him to win the hands she could—which meant biting her sharp-edged tongue a lot, she had no doubt. It was a fine line she would be treading for the next thirty-six months. That was how she saw it in her mind... years sounded too long to endure. Silly, it might be, but they were all going to have to find a way through this. And it began with the man edging closer to her spot to agree with the plan. The ball was in his court. But she was going to win the game,

slow and easy, all the way to the finish line.

Burkitts weren't losers.

"Punctual. That is good. We do have something in common. Although keep in mind that I don't usually respond well to summoning with a decided lack of manners involved. A 'please and thank-you' goes a long way in case you missed that class in social behavior."

His gaze locked on her as he drew his mount up short, facing her square on, the reins laced through gloved fingers that came to rest on the pommel of his saddle. "I figured you for a short-and to-the-point type of female, seeing as how that has been the sum total of our interactions to date. But social graces aren't on the agenda right now. My daughteris, though. Mind that I left that message before returning to the house and finding her all excited with news of a present that had been delivered to her just before I arrived. One of your ranch hands dropped it off. It was a bit of a surprise. But then Burkitts aren't above bribery to get what they want."

"It was just a book. I remembered when I wasn't much older than her and wanted a Great Pyrenees puppy myself. I read every book I could get my hands on, so I could use the information to make the case to my grandmother. I thought it would be better off in Lacy's hands than gathering dust on the top shelf of the library at home. I'm glad to hear that it made her happy. And bribery might have been in my grandmother's toolbox, but it's not in mine."

"And did it work? Did you win the case for getting your puppy?"

A fleeting memory darkened the moment, but she hoped she had pushed it away before he saw. There could be no weakness of any kind in front of this man and his all-seeing scrutiny.

“No. I had to wait another two years before my grandfather gifted me with an Australian Shepherd that was far more in keeping with what was considered a working ranch dog. The dog could earn its keep that way. But we aren’t here to discuss dogs. You’re concerned about your daughter, and I realize that this is putting you into a situation that would impact her. I can only give my word that I will do my best to make things as easy as possible, to follow whatever you feel is best, as far as including her in this fine mess for the next three years. Of course, I also realize that you may choose to opt out of this whole deal due to her. I wish my grandmother had given that more thought before she set this in motion. But if you choose to end this all right now, so be it.”

He sat silent for a long moment, his gaze never wavering, but considering—and more unnerving than before.

“I walk away, you lose the ranch. That’s how it was presented to me earlier. Is that still the case?”

“Yes.”Don’t let him see the feelings. Straightforward and no emotion. Burkitts didn’t cry. At least not until they were alone.

“You’d give up all this”—his head did a brief nod to the land that stretched to the horizon and beyond around them—“if I say no because of my child. A child you never met until earlier today, yet who holds the key to this dream of yours.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“I don’t know how many other ways there are to say the word yes. A child’s life is more valuable. This land will continue with or without me on it. It won’t be scarred, not in the same way a human being could be. I would want no part of that. All I can do is assure you that I have thought of what the next three years might look like with Lacy in mind. I don’t pretend to know about parenting. But I can promise kindness and a safe home and a future secured by what you will be walking away with once the agreement is done. Lacy will indeed have no worries in whatever future she chooses. You’ll have to decide if you trust my word or not.”

“Well, I don’t really know you and you don’t know me. So it looks like we have to take a lot of things on blind faith and words of promise. I haven’t had very much luck in trusting in those things, especially from females with a craving for money and power. And I am not the easiest of people to live with. Guess we’ll have to figure out a lot of things as we go along.”

“Sounds not too far off from what most marriages begin with. Except for the words of undying love and all that romantic stuff. But this is business. And as long as we agree on that, then who is to say this can’t work in everyone’s favor? Do we have a deal?”

He nudged his horse closer so that their knees were only an inch or so apart. She could note the fine lines beside the green eyes that had flecks of gold glinting in their depths. They held her attention for more than a few seconds. He had a strong chin, too, but she had not noted the slight indentation or what might be evidence of curved lines beside the strong mouth that next caught her gaze. Had she never really looked at this man before? Why should she find him of interest now? That would never do. Sammi Jo sat up straighter in the saddle.

“A deal? With a minor amendment. Matt Mateo had a chat with your attorneys. Seems we have thirty days to ‘do the deed,’ so to speak. To actually say the ‘I do’ part of all this. In that time, I say we use it to see how Lacy responds to you. Townspeople won’t be so quick to gossip with a whirlwind courtship and then a quiet wedding a few weeks from now. I won’t have unnecessary gossip involving my daughter. If Lacy has any problem with you in that time frame, it is all off. We can sign any agreements you need to make you feel better in the meantime. But rest assured that no Hawkes goes back on their word once given. Unlike the Burkitts have done in the past.”

She felt the bristles rise. “Whatever happened in the past is just that. And for whatever my grandmother’s reasoning for all of this now, rest assured that I follow my own path. I make a promise, I keep it, come hell or high water. I have my grandfather’s genes too. And for some reason known only to him, he thought the Hawkes had redeeming qualities and tried to make amends over the years, also. I’ll have to see those qualities for myself before I come to any conclusion like his. In the meantime, I believe the same as he did in the power of a handshake to close a deal.”

Sammi Jo stuck her hand out first, chin leveled, eye contact to eye contact. He sat still for a heartbeat or two. Then, slowly, he withdrew the worn work glove from his hand, and his palm enveloped hers. The heat of it surprised her first. Then that warmth seemed to spread up her arm and across her chest, and there was an unfamiliar feeling in the pit of her stomach. She might have taken her hand back in that moment, but his grip was as sure and steady as his gaze. And in that moment, on that hill, they struck a deal. Good or bad? Had she just chosen to dance with the devil? Or had she, in a fleeting moment, found a glimpse of what Heaven might be like?

\*

“We have an agreement.”

“Which is what?” Jaxson halted beside the yard gate leading to the Hawkes’ main house. He had arrived at much the same time Beaudry rode up from the west pasture.

“We’ll use the thirty days to set the stage, so to speak, for the gossipers, and to give some time to see how Lacy does with this woman’s entry into our lives. If all goes well, in thirty days, we’ll make it all legal. We shook on it.”

A slight smile curved Jaxson’s face.

“Don’t seem so overjoyed that your brother sacrificed himself for the Hawkes family future.”

“I’m just envisioning the handshake and wondering who had the sharpest blade hidden in the other hand behind their back. I think I would bet on the red-haired lady. No offense, little brother.”

Beaudry grunted and headed his horse toward the barn. It was just as well, as he wasn’t about to own up to the fact that he’d had the same quick thought as he had grasped the hand Sammi Jo offered to him. But that thought had swiftly disappeared in a puff of smoke when a jolt short-circuited his thought process as skin met skin. Whether she had felt the same strange sensation, he wasn’t certain. Maybe she was just that good a poker-faced card player? Burkitts had always beaten the Hawkes when it came to the cards. But this was different.

The breeze picked up and his gaze caught a swiftly formed little dust devil churning its way across the space between the house and barns. A prickle ran up the back of his neck, and he lifted a hand to massage it away. What wouldn’t go away as easily was the feeling that a storm might be brewing somewhere in the distance—just beyond the horizon of wherever their agreement would take them.

\*



Beaudry entered the ranch house a half hour later. It was quiet except for the sound of the kitchen radio playing, which was soon switched off after the door shut behind him. Serafina, his housekeeper, came from the direction of the kitchen, wiping her hands on the checkered apron she was also busy extricating herself from. Her usual smile shone bright white against her tanned skin. The woman had been a mainstay in their household since both he and Jaxson had been in grade school. Their mother drunk herself to an early grave, never having gotten past the fact she married just a lowly, hard-scrabble rancher. A tractor accident claimed him right after the boys graduated from high school. From that point on, he and Jaxson were all the family each had—until Beaudry married and along came Lacy. He knew he couldn't have managed all these years with household work and raising a small baby and then a young child.

“Is Lacy getting ready?”

“Sí. She has had her bath, and I left her dressing a few minutes ago. She wanted to choose her outfit herself.”

“Thanks. I'll hurry her along and then get ready myself. Thanks for getting things started. And now, you have an early evening off. Make Miguel take you out for dinner tonight. You deserve it.”

“We are going over to our daughter's house for our dinner out. And spend some time with our new grandbaby. You and little missy have a good dinner too. It's nice to see you and Lacy having a special time of it. That is, if you can get her head out of that book that came today. She hasn't let it out of her sight all afternoon.” She ended with a shake of her head, and her compact body shook, as well, with her laughter.

The woman retraced her steps to the kitchen, and Beaudry headed down the hallway and then up the stairs to Lacy's bedroom. Its red-and-blue patchwork quilt and matching curtains were shared with a mound of stuffed dogs in the center of the bed

and two of the four corner shelves in the room. Lacy was seated cross-legged in the center of the bed, her head bowed over a page of the large book and the Beast lying next to her, his huge head resting on one of her knees as she explained to him the highlights of the page.

“Have you memorized that book yet?” he asked, leaning a shoulder against the door’s framework. He felt the day’s drama seep out of him, replaced with a softening smile on his face as he gazed at the small child that was the center of his world. She was the balm that calmed him after a day’s work. All he did was for her. Had been since she took her first breath into the world. But now, they were headed down an unknown road ahead, and each step he took had to be with great care.

Her eyes gleamed with excitement as her gaze left the printed page and greeted his. She scooted off the bed in one swift movement and came to his side, offering the book for his inspection.

“Isn’t it something? It came specially forme.I’ve never had a package come to the house for me before. And it’s got writing in the front too. Look at it! It’s from that nice lady that was here before. She is really a nice lady, isn’t she?”

Beaudry took the book and looked at the page in the front that his daughter seemed so intent upon showing him. The handwriting was flowing and brought the lady in question into the room with them.

For Lacy and the Beast, always take care of each other. Hoping this brings you many hours of enjoyment. Sammi Jo Burkitt.

“That is indeed something. You need to thank her for this thoughtful gift tonight.”

“Tonight?” His daughter’s eyes grew round in her small face. “Is she going to come to dinner tonight? Is she really?” Her enthusiasm was barely contained. Beaudry had

to pause for a moment. He hadn't seen such obvious joy in his little girl since last Christmas, when she found the bright red bicycle underneath the tree.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Not exactly,” he began, then saw the shadow of disappointment take the smile away. He hastened to add, “We’re going to meet her in town for dinner. At Dawson’s, your favorite place. Then you can thank her.”

“This is the best day ever! Let’s go.” Lacy placed the book on her desk in the corner in a flash, and she was back beside him. “Do you think she’ll like my jeans and my shirt? Should I wear a dress?”

For a moment, he was taken aback. For Lacy to mention the “d” word was a shock. He could count on one hand the number of times she had willingly put on a dress in her few years of life. Now she was willing to do so out of the blue. Perhaps he needed to keep a serious eye on the effect this “marriage” might have on his daughter, who clearly was showing signs of hero worship of a woman she had just barely met.

Easy does it. Those words would be a good mantra to keep on the front burner in all of this change that was about to turn their quiet world upside down. Was the real price of the free land and money in the bank worth it? He would have to be ever vigilant and make certain no hearts were broken in all of what was to come. Hearts in the plural? It was only his daughter’s he needed to safeguard. One small heart only.

Then why did he suddenly feel he might have miscalculated?

### Chapter Four

It was ridiculous. Her stomach churned like a schoolgirl’s full of butterflies at meeting her first beau on a silly date. At least that’s the way Sammi Jo described it to herself as she sat at the table Beaudry had reserved for them. She was early. The table

she had been shown to butted up against the huge floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the sidewalk and all of Main Street. Every eye in the restaurant's front dining room would be able to see them as they ate. And every car and truck and passerby on the street would also have a great view. Beaudry had certainly made good on his decision to let the townspeople know that they were making a loud statement this evening.

It was a bit too loud of one for her, but then again, the clock was ticking and not in their favor. But this was just something else to be borne with as much patience as she could muster. Keep your eye on the prize. Those words echoed over and over in the back of her mind each time any niggles of doubt seeped in. Aces High was worth every moment of the next three years of her life.

Whatever it took, she would do. Even if it meant marrying the tall cowboy headed toward her at that moment. Their gazes met, but neither of them smiled. Until Lacy Hawkes let go of her father's hand and fairly flew across the space, eyes bright, smile as wide as the state itself, and her little body animated. That brought a natural grin from Sammi. The tiny missile only stopped when she reached Sammi Jo's side.

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. An anxious expression began to replace the faltering smile. Sammi Jo recognized the familiar signs of sudden shyness replacing the instantaneous excitement. She remembered the discomfort.

Sammi's smile lit with encouragement and welcome. "Hello again, Lacy. Don't you look pretty tonight? I love the blue color of your shirt. It's a favorite of mine too. I'm so glad you came to have dinner with me tonight. Did you like the book?"

The little girl slid easily into the chair Sammi had indicated next to hers and thank goodness the brilliance returned in the little girl's smile. Lacy's head went into a nodding frenzy as her father sat down on the other side of her, across from Sammi's position.

“Where are your manners, Lacy?” he gently prodded.

“Yes, yes, it was the best surprise ever. I read it to Beast too. It has so many pictures in it. I love it. Thank you very much for giving it to me.” She took a breath and a quick look over at her father to see if she did okay and left nothing out. He nodded his approval.

“I’m happy you and Beast are enjoying it. I loved reading it when I was about your age. I’m glad I remembered it was still in the library. Do you enjoy books?”

“I love to read. You can learn a lot of things and go to lots of places you’ve never been.”

“I felt the same way when I was your age. And I did read a lot all through school. I don’t have a lot of time to read now, and I miss that. But it’s good you love to read. We have a lot of books at my home. When you come to visit, you can certainly look at them and borrow whatever you would like.”

“Really? You have your very own library? When can we go to her house, Daddy?”

“We will visit soon enough, Lacy. Take a look at the menu so we can order when the waitress comes our way. Or do you want your usual?”

“The usual, I am betting.” Those words were spoken by the tall man who had approached their table and stood just between Lacy and Beaudry with a welcoming smile on his face. Dawson Hambrick was the owner of Dawson’s Gastronomic Eatery and Saloon, a transplanted Aussie when his mother, a divorcee with a six-year-old son, came to Texas on a two-week vacation and ended up staying for the next forty years when she met and married Dawson’s rancher stepfather. Dawson, six foot three, spare as a rod and with flaming red hair evident in his beard and his shoulder-length hair bound back in his usual ponytail, cut quite a figure among the usual jeans-and-

boots cowboy contingent that were his normal customers. Spending two months every year since his arrival back in Australia with his biological father had kept his Aussie roots alive and his speech tinged with an accent that gave the Texas twang a run for its money. The fact that he served excellent home-cooked Texas food made the locals overlook other facets of his eccentricities.

“Three steak fingers, curly fries, a side of green beans, one corn muffin, strawberry jam, a glass of milk—did I get it right?” Dawson eyed Lacy with a grin on his face. “And if you manage all of that, I am betting there is a fresh-made pan of my banana pudding in the fridge that I might be willing to part with a bowl of for dessert.”

“I think that seals the deal, Dawson.” Beaudry grinned. “And what about you?” His gaze landed on Sammi Jo.

“I promise to eat all my grilled chicken breast dinner, too, if I can have some of that banana pudding included.”

“I can see where this is going. I might need to make another pan of pudding. Let’s get your dinner orders turned in and then we’ll see about that dessert.”

After Dawson departed, there was a quiet lapse of conversation at the table. Lacy tested the waters. “Do you have a dog at your house?”

Sammi Jo nodded. “We have four working ranch dogs. They keep busy with the hands going out and working with our stock when they’re needed. I’ve only had one dog as a pet when I was younger... about your age and until I was twelve or so.”

Sammi Jo maintained the smile on her face while a pause stretched into silence.

“Miss Sammi Jo might be interested in hearing about your school and other things.” It was a gentle hint, but Sammi caught the brief knowledge in those eyes that Beaudry

knew a change of subject would be welcome. And that gave her a different pause. Perhaps there were more layers to the man than she might have given him credit for. This just might be a learning experience, however brief, for all of them.

“Yes, I would like to hear about your school. What grade are you in?”

“I’m in the fourth grade, even though I’m still eight. But I’ll be nine in November. My teacher is Miss Crawford. She’s nice. I’m one of her helpers in the classroom.”



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Helpers?”

“I get to do things like pass out paperwork and erase the boards and take things to the office for her. She chose me and two others because we get our work done and follow the rules and can help the other kids in class with their work if they need it too.”

“That sounds like a very responsible job. Good for you. What’s your favorite subject?”

“I like history because there are a lot of things to read about that are interesting. But I really love art and math.” The food arrived, creating a pause in the conversation. But Lacy picked up the subject once the waitress left them. “What was your favorite subject?”

“Well, I loved history too. I still do. I would love to have time to go to more museums and see some historic places that I’ve read about.”

“Me, too! Maybe my dad would take us sometime?” Her hopeful look shot across to Beaudry, who had been listening in silence. Now he had been drawn into it. His daughter’s hopeful tones and pleading eyes were full bore on him. He glanced at Sammi Jo.

Might be her turn to help him out.

“I’m sure your dad would love to do that, but you know how busy a ranch can keep someone at this time of year. But I bet he’ll give it some thought when he has the time.” Sammi cast him a smile that said, “debt repaid.”

“I will certainly keep that request in mind,” he said to his daughter. “Now, get to work on cleaning that plate, young lady, if you want that promised banana pudding.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, look who we have here. I couldn’t believe it when I looked over here from our table and saw this trio.” That elevated voice with its pitched volume and twang always made Sammi Jo cringe a bit inside when she came too close to it—something she tried to always avoid when she could. Melba Tweet was married to the interim mayor of Burkitt, and president emeritus of the busybody society. Sammi’s grandmother had often referred to her as the “twit” and had little time for such nonsense, as the woman spread gossip like manure around a garden. The chair legs scraped on the wooden floor as Beaudry stood in the mannerly way he had obviously been raised. Sammi Jo took note of that too.

“Miss Melba, how nice to see you.”

A hand fluttered to rest on Beaudry’s elbow, and she added a coquettish upturn of the head as she simpered for the man beside her. “Why, Beaudry Hawkes, it always does my old heart good to see you. And you have two lovely dining companions with you, I see. I just had to stop over and say hello to you.” And then she zeroed in on Sammi Jo. “And what a surprise to see you, a Burkitt, dining with a Hawkes. Whatever would your grandmother say about such a thing?” She ended with a laugh that didn’t quite ring true.

“I imagine she would be quite pleased and seated right beside us. Because that ancient feud over a silly card game is such old news. Most people have forgotten such nonsense. But thank you for thinking of her, Mrs. Twitt...oh my, I mean Mrs. Tweet. Slight slip of the tongue, sorry.” She hoped her smile was just as genuine as the one that seemed to be causing Melba a bit of pain at the moment, one side slipping downward as well.

Beaudry made a slight clearing of his throat before he spoke. "I see your husband at the front door, trying to get your attention. It was nice seeing you. Give Henry my best."

"Oh yes, he is so impatient. Something about some sports program he must get home to see on television. But it was lovely to see you, Beaudry." She glanced at Sammi Jo. "You too. Enjoy the rest of your dinner." She gave a pat to Beaudry's arm before she favored him with another smile and then sailed off to join her husband across the room. Beaudry sank back into his chair, fork in hand to finish his meal. His expression gave nothing away.

"Is she one of your friends?" Lacy's question was innocent enough as she looked at Sammi Jo.

"Not so much a friend as just an acquaintance of my grandmother's."

Sammi Jo caught the upward movement of the corner of Beaudry's mouth, yet he kept his gaze on his plate. Wise man to remain quiet.

The rest of the meal was finished in pleasant small talk, mostly between Lacy and herself. She was very conscious of the fact that the man at the table was keenly observing the pair of them. It was a bit disconcerting, but she could understand it from his point of view. He was a father concerned with the welfare of his little girl and how what they were about to embark upon would have ramifications for all of them. She couldn't fault him for being cautious. The fact that she had to make some adjustments to her previous opinions about Beaudry was surprising enough and gave her some things to think about as well. Deep in this set of thoughts, she caught that Lacy had said something to her, but she had no idea what it was.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch the last of what you said."

Lacy looked a bit unsure as she glanced at her dad and then again at Sammi Jo. “I was just asking if you might could come to the open house at my school on Tuesday? If you aren’t really busy or anything. We give tours of our schoolroom and you see the projects we’ve done and meet our teachers and stuff like that. You might be bored, though, so it’s okay if you can’t come.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun.” Where had that swift response come from? Too late to take anything back, however; the smile that lit the child’s face was megawatt. It touched Sammi Jo that it might mean so much to the child. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“But we do know that this is awfully short notice, and we can understand if you really can’t spare time for a school event. Right, Lacy? Maybe another time would be better for Miss Sammi Jo and...”

Who was he to speak for her? He wanted them to get used to each other, to be seen by people in town to make things easier, so what was he doing? He might have used his bossy ways with his ex, but she was certainly not Sandy Lou, and neither was he taking up where her grandmother left off in bossing her around. The sooner he realized she was her own person, the better for all of them.

“Thank you for the invitation, Lacy. I think it would be great to see your school and all the things you are doing and learning so far. I make my own schedule, and this is a priority now. I will most certainly be there.” The warmth of her smile was for the child. The fire in her gaze was for the man across from her. He would have to be blind to not get the silent message aimed straight at him.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” Beaudry whispered. Lacy had turned to say something in response to the waitress’s approach with their desserts, so she didn’t catch the words. Sammi Jo glanced at him.

“I’m a fighter and my own person. That won’t change, no matter what else does. But we both agreed to try this on.” Her voice was just a side whisper, but the message was loud and clear.

“Well, we took that giant leap off the cliff tonight. Hope the fall won’t be painful.”

“I’m more worried about the landing.” Their gazes locked in that moment, and something unusual passed between them. Something Sammi Jo had no words to describe in that moment. But it might just be as strange to him as it was to her.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Whatever had they gotten themselves into? What had her grandmother done to her even now?

\*

Have I lost every ounce of common sense I ever had? Beaudry's brain kept repeating that sentiment as he drove Lacy and himself home after the dinner. True that the dinner had gone better than he had expected—the first part of it, at least. Then she put up a prickly wall again and decided to spite him when he was trying to help her out of a situation with Lacy that maybe she might have felt pressed into. Or so he told himself. And darn it if she had managed to have him doubting his decisions as easily as that. The woman could be a challenge in sanity. Why couldn't the whole evening have been civil, cordial even? He had almost felt more relaxed than he would have believed a meal between himself and Sammi Jo Burkitt could ever be described. Almost was the kicker.

Lacy had been quiet since they parted from Sammi Jo at her truck fifteen minutes ago, leaving a drifting silence inside their vehicle. His daughter's closed eyes would remain so until they pulled into the driveway at home. The sweet innocent smile curved her small mouth and never ceased to tug at his heartstrings as he gazed upon his little girl's sleeping face in the rearview mirror. If he were able to manage it, she might remain in her blissful state even after he had carried her upstairs to her bed.

But the quiet darkness gave his mind time to go over each aspect of the evening and weigh it out again.

Sammi Jo's hair had surprised him first. It wasn't in its usual ponytail state. It hung

loose around her shoulders. Its vibrant reddish-gold color seemed to shine even more so under the lights of the restaurant than it did in the sunlight. His gaze had singled her out as they exited the truck and stepped onto the sidewalk. It was evident she had not seen their arrival.

She was wearing not one of her staple ranch articles of clothing but had an emerald-green blouse of some shiny fabric, with short sleeves and a soft bow of fabric at the shoulder. Instead of jeans, she had cream-colored slacks on her long legs. And there were sandals on her feet instead of work boots. He had stopped for a moment or two before opening the front door and stepping inside, to allow his mind to adjust to this Sammi Jo. He was trying to equate the two versions of the same female into one. His brain needed to stay sharp. He couldn't be off balance in any way.

But it was as if Lacy and Sammi Jo weren't really strangers at all. Lacy had a streak of shyness that could be a Mississippi-mile wide at times. But there seemed to be very little of that in evidence with Sammi Jo. That should be a plus. Should be...

But in the back of his mind at all times was the simple fact that this wasn't a long-term deal. There would be no "until death do us part" in any vows they might make. Three years, and forever would be done—and that sobering thought sank with the speed of a lead balloon to the pit of his stomach. They were adults and they would walk away... she with her ranch intact, and he with a secure future for Lacy and money enough to make their ranch into what they dreamed it could be. But what about Lacy? No pot of gold at the end of any rainbow would be worth harm to his daughter. He could only hope that as the days progressed, there would be some sign that he was headed in the right direction or something that would make him pull the plug totally without a backward glance.

For all he knew, Sammi Jo could up and change her mind. She was hard to keep in a box given the way she had reacted over dinner to the whole subject of attending the school fair. He had given her an easy out of the situation. Sammi Jo Burkitt would be

as out of her sphere as he would be at a fancy dress party in her mansion. But it was plain she had decided to be stubborn and not take the lifeline. She couldn't say he didn't try to help her out. But then, she was more than stubborn when it came to the Aces High. She would never consider waving that flag of surrender.

When donkeys fly, to quote his housekeeper's favorite saying. If there were ever a female totally attached to a place, to a land and the way of life it served up, it was Sammi Jo Burkitt. He had only to be around her for five minutes to figure that one out. She lived and breathed the Aces High. She had a double dose of Burkitt blood in her veins, reinforced by hardheaded, hot-tempered tenacity. He doubted the word *quithad* ever been uttered from her lips.

His thought flashed straight to her face as she had sat at the table earlier. His mind had wandered a time or two to the delicate bow shape of pale, pink-tinted lips. Funny, he had never paid that much attention to her features before, them being neighbors and all. But their worlds were just that—worlds apart. His family worked hard to maintain what they had. The Burkitts might work hard, building onto their empire with all the money to buy the help they needed—the equipment, animals, you name it—but just a snap of their fingers and bank vaults opened wide. His first impressions of Sammi Jo Burkitt couldn't be so easily discarded. Sandy Lou had also pointed out many things to him about who she called “the spoiled heiress” during their time together.

If anything came first, it was the fact she was a Burkitt. There might have been a bit of a feud going on over a poker game played some couple of hundred years ago between the Hawkes and the Burkitts, but that was water under the bridge by this generation. It was a waste of time and effort as far as he was concerned. His beef with Sarah Burkitt had centered on how she lorded it over all her neighbors and even those who worked the ranch. She never let anyone forget she was the mistress of all they surveyed, and her word was law.



Her husband had been the only saving grace between that family and others. Ranch hands stayed because of him and loyalty to him. And he had to admit that loyalty looked to have seeped over into Sammi Jo's favor. He had his own reasons for not feeling all that kindly to the spitfire of the granddaughter. And he would have to deal with those in short order. He didn't want anything to taint what Lacy thought. As to what Sammi Jo thought about him? Well, he had no idea how Sammi Jo and her sister might feel about it. Couldn't be too bad, given she was willing to trade her name for his, if only for three years... thirty-six months. And he had to admit that it sounded better to use the thirty-six-month calendar term.

One step at a time—it was a blinking yellow caution sign in the back of his brain. There were twenty-nine days to go before any vows had to be said. A lot could happen in that timeframe.

## Chapter Five

“The good news is that you two haven't killed each other yet.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence. I'm so glad you called to offer your support in this craziness.”

“What else is a big sister for?”

“That's what I have asked myself for the last thirty years. And I still haven't figured it out.” Sammi Jo was quick with the comeback, shaking her head in the process. Some things never changed. But it did feel good to hear her sibling's voice, even long distance.

“So, you met Lacy. And you two seem to have hit it off, which is a big check mark in the plus column. You three are making your public appearances to get the gossip fodder under some sort of control before the main event is sprung on everyone. And

you had a civilized dinner with an invitation to get into deeper water by joining in a true rite of passage: being seen at the local school fair. Good on you.”

“I realize you are probably channeling your best rendition from your cheerleading days, but I’m not feeling it just yet. This could all come to a crashing halt any moment. Beaudry could come to his senses, or Lacy could take a dislike to me for some reason. He and I both agree that no matter what, Lacy is our first consideration. Her life will be the most impacted if we do this and then end it in three years.”

“Hmm...” Laurel paused to think a moment or two. “Yes, I see the point, and it is very valid. But what if you and Beaudry decide not to end it in three years? What if by some miracle of miracles, you find that the two of you just might be a perfect match along the way? Stranger things have happened when that pesky little thing called love sneaks in to disrupt the best-intentioned plans... or so I hear.”

“Have you been out in the California sun too long?” Sammi Jo’s tone went up a few decibels. It was an absurd thought. “We are pushing the envelope as it is just trying to maintain a civility in this charade, given our past histories. It’s like we both know we are on the same tightrope and one wrong move and we go crashing down. At least that’s what it feels like. I can’t even let my brain go to how long this has to be the ‘norm’ in our lives. I just keep telling myself the end will justify the means. It has to, right?”

“Don’t ask me that. This was your decision, remember? You want to hold on to that ranch so badly, you agreed to this pact with the devil.”

“Beaudry could easily become the devil if he chooses.”

“I wasn’t talking about him. I had our grandmother in mind. This whole plan was her concocted way to remain in control of our lives and have people still do her bidding. You just remember that you might have a streak of stubborn Burkitt pride a mile wide

inside you, but no one will fault you if you decide at any time to chuck it all, take a big payoff, and ride off into the sunset to anyplace your heart might desire.”

“That’s not an option. I will fight for this land as long as I breathe. This is the only place in this world where I want to be.”

“It’s your Alamo, then.” Laurel’s tone was a solemn statement of fact. “If I were casting this movie, your heroine part would have to be a mix of a female Davy Crockett and a fiery Scarlett O’Hara.” She finished on a laugh.

“Now that is a movie of yours, I might pay to see. And on that note, I have to get busy. We’re clearing more pasture to the north of Sandy Creek. I could use your help on a bulldozer if you want a fun week away from the beach.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“No thanks. I lost my driver’s license for heavy machinery, dear sister. You take care and let me know how the romance progresses. Be sure to send me the invite to the wedding!” The line went dead before Sammi Jo could come back with a stinging response.

Romance, indeed! Her sister had written too many chick flicks with happy-ever-after involved. She took the stairs two at a time, pulling on the work gloves she had tucked into her back jeans pocket when she had paused to take her sister’s phone call. There was nothing romantic about pulling up cedar trees by the roots, scattering a few rattlesnakes along the way, and sweating through your jeans and cotton shirt in the first five minutes. If she hurried, she might get the newer dozer with the fan in the cab! Such a tiny but important thing to make her smile. She could pity the poor girls who counted themselves lucky if they found the right shade of lipstick for a new outfit. This was the life for her. She’d worry about lipstick later.

\*

“She’ll come, right?” Lacy’s head was on a swivel, keeping a watch out for a particular person in the growing number of people entering through the doors of McNamara Elementary School.

“That is the sixth time you have asked that question since we left the house. My answer has not and will not change. She said she was coming, and she has not called to change that answer. I do believe she’ll be here. She’s a Burkitt if nothing else. Find another question.”

Lacy was silent for just a few heartbeats. She stopped and checked out the group of

people coming in through the side door just ahead of them. She shook her head. “What if she doesn’t come? And what does that mean? That she’s a Burkitt?”

Beaudry let a long, low breath escape his pursed lips. Little pitchers and big ears...remember that and think before speaking in front of your daughter. “When I said find another question, perhaps I wasn’t specific enough. Do not be concerned that—”

“She’s here! I knew she’d come.” Lacy was dragging him along in her wake as she had taken off in the direction where Sammi Jo Burkitt stood in a moment of hesitation. At least he thought it was her. This person had legs. Legs that were long and very nice looking, that ended in a pair of beige high heels. His gaze went upward over the same length of tanned legs and found a denim skirt, the edge of which was a sedate length of a couple inches above the knee. The blouse was a scarlet color with a collared vee front and long sleeves cuffed at the wrists. A brown leather-and-silver concho link belt kept the Western flavor at her waist. This time, her long hair had been caught back into some sort of fancy braiding. And she had makeup on—light, but quite a change from her normal fresh-faced routine. The red lipstick brought his attention front and center until he realized that she was aware of his stare and waiting for him to gain some control. She had caught him out, gauging by the slight upturn of a corner of that mouth.

“I hope I’m dressed appropriately. I’ve never been to one of these, at least since the third grade or so.”

“You’re pretty,” Lacy piped up at the same time he responded with, “You’ll do fine.” Both females looked at him as his words seemed to fall a bit flat. He didn’t care for how a look from those blue eyes could knock him off-kilter. Nor did he care for being off-kilter at any time and certainly not around her...or rather, a Burkitt. He was glad he had taken time to switch into a pair of dark-blue starched jeans and a freshly ironed navy-and-white striped, Western cut, long-sleeved shirt. His boots had a shine, and

his cream straw hat had been dusted off. To any onlooker, as they walked up the steps of the school to the main floor with Lacy between them, they were any other young couple following the age-old routine at the beginning of another school year in the small country town.

Except this couple was the focal point for quite a few stares and whispers. One of the Burkitt girls was in their midst, in a dress and heels—and not the fancy dresser from California, either. This was from many of the females in attendance. But the males were just as mystified, only more along the lines of male appreciation in discovering the very nice curves and long legs they had not seen before now on display.

Sammi Jo Burkitt and Beaudry Hawkes. Smiling. At each other. Imagine that.

\*

“I had no idea that this was such a big deal, that so many people would be here.” Sammi Jo was trying to keep her balance in the heels and maintain a pleasant smile on her face, and not make too much eye contact with so many gazes so full of speculation. At that moment, she felt a small palm slide into hers as they moved along with the flow of people. She glanced down and met the smile on Lacy’s face beside her.

“Don’t worry. We won’t let you get lost. We’ll go to my classroom first, then we can go to the cafeteria where they have lots of things to eat and drink. And there is an art auction later too. It’s how we raise money for things like gym stuff and the playground and things like that.”

Sammi Jo was surprised to hear that part. For some reason, she had supposed that her grandmother was a benefactress of the school, which her McNamara parents had built for the town. The building held their name above its doorway. It gave her something to file away in her mind to ask her attorneys about later. Perhaps she should do

something for the school too.

It felt nice to be included in Lacy's world. And the fact that now the three of them were joined by hands made the idea of becoming a real family unit one day all the more real. That pitched a funny hitch in her pulse, and she raised her gaze, only to be caught by a like one from Beaudry. Sammi Jo was surprised by her own reaction to such a simple act and even more so about how natural, even nice, it felt. Surely, those thoughts wouldn't be invading his mind too?

"There you two are," the female voice greeted them as they stepped into a brightly colored room with several people milling about inside.

The woman's gaze seemed to be caught on the connection of hands between Lacy and Sammi. That gaze swiftly lifted to the man standing behind Lacy at the moment, a question not being asked but definitely present.

"Miss Carpenter, may I present Sammi Jo Burkitt? She's a close friend of ours." Beaudry was smooth in his introduction, almost as if he had practiced it a few times. Sammi Jo met the woman's smile that she was certain had come with much practice in greeting parents and families.

"Welcome, Miss Burkitt. I am so pleased you were able to come along and see what our little Miss Lacy has been doing so far. She is such a bright and very helpful addition to our class. Please enjoy your visit with us tonight. A friend of Beaudry's is always welcome here."

And could the Keep Your Hands Off sign be any bigger? Sammi Jo recognized the warning through the thinly veiled smiles that didn't quite reach anything close to lukewarm in the gaze. So was this something her grandmother's idiotic will was throwing a wrench into? Not that her grandmother would have cared had she known. But Sammi did. She cared far more than she thought she might. And she didn't like

how that felt. Of course, Beaudry had been married. And he was one of those eligible bachelors that females in town flocked around. She had seen that in person at the rodeos and horse shows where she had competed against him.

But he was always much more circumspect after his divorce. He didn't flaunt his adventures with the opposite sex like so many of the single males in town. Perhaps the schoolteacher had set her sights on him? Lacy certainly seemed to like her well enough. She had experience with children, being a teacher and all.

Sammi Jo felt her stomach roll over, and not in a good way.

"Do you feel okay?" Beaudry whispered beside her. The whiff of woodsy cologne sidetracked her response for just a moment... then she remembered where they were. She gave more effort into her smile.

"I'm fine." She turned to Lacy. "Now, show me all the great things you are doing in this classroom." And for the next few minutes, she was treated to papers and drawings and award certificates that Beaudry dutifully gathered as his daughter instructed.

"Lacy, I am amazed at the grades on these papers. You're an excellent student. I can certainly see how much you love math too. You are so good at it."

"Thank you, Miss Sammi Jo. I try to do good in all my work. But science is the hardest."

"But you have eighties on what I have seen on those. That is still a good grade."

"Did you make good grades in school?"



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Sammi Jo nodded, a memory or two of those days coloring her response. “Luckily, I loved history and English and most other things. Except for math.” She laughed along with Lacy. “But I had to keep trying. My grandmother told me that I needed to think of making a B as the same as making a C. And C’s were not acceptable in her way of thinking. I had to study very hard on a subject or two, so I can understand what you meant just now. Just know that it is important that you study hard and learn what you can, but never think that not making an A all the time means you have failed at something. It just tells you that you can always do better next time. You fail only when you stop trying.”

“That’s a better way to look at something. I’m going to remember that.”

“I think it’s time that we take a little break, head to the cafeteria, and see what we can find there to eat and drink. Sound like a plan?” Beaudry smiled at his daughter.

He had heard their conversation. Sammi Jo hoped she hadn’t overstepped. She needed to consider what she said around an impressionable child. But what experience did she have? Maybe there was a book or two in all the thousands of books in the library at the ranch that could teach her a thing or two about children. Just like she had told Lacy, you could only fail if you don’t try. And she didn’t want to fail for all their sakes over the next three years.

Sammi Jo sank down thankfully in a chair at a table off to one side, out of the flow of the traffic in the large, open room that served as the cafeteria for all six grades. At the end of the room was a broad stage. That was where the emcee was making announcements and explaining that the art found around the walls had been done by students, faculty, and staff. A few pieces had been donated. What wasn’t auctioned

off that evening would be donated to the local library for display.

“Here you go. One iced lemonade for you and this scrumptious-looking pastry with strawberry filling. You do like strawberry, I hope.” Beaudry made the announcement as he took the empty chair beside her, handing over the plastic glass with her drink and setting the pastry on the table in front of her.

“Did you lose Lacy someplace along the way?”

“She asked to go visit her two friends at their table across the room. I told her to stay in this area and she could do that. And I figured you would like some time to rest your feet. I don’t imagine you spend all that much time wearing high heels around the ranch. Or maybe you do?”

She gave him a shake of her head and a smile that she was certain was more of a grimace. “You guessed it right. High heels are not exactly filling my closet. In fact, I borrowed these from Laurel’s stash in one of her many closets at the ranch. It comes in handy to be almost the same size in many ways. If I have to wear fancy duds, I just raid her closets. She’ll never miss them.”

“I see. Very smart of you and cost-effective. Does she share willingly?”

“Well, she might not have known about a few of the times. She truly has so many clothes, I doubted she even realized that she had purchased whatever I was wearing at the time. But it did take me a while this afternoon. I had no idea what to wear to something like this, and I didn’t want to stand out or look silly or make Lacy embarrassed she asked me. I ended up asking the racing secretary down at the barns what she wore to these things. She has four kids in school, so I thought she would be an expert. She was very helpful in choosing this outfit.”

“Well, it’s a perfect choice. The look suits you.” Beaudry gave the easy compliment

and then took a sip of his iced tea. His smile caused a piece of the pastry to stick as she swallowed, and she quickly gulped a sip of her drink. A compliment of a personal nature from Beaudry Hawkes could be almost lethal. She needed to keep that in mind. Change the subject.

“I hope you didn’t mind what I said to Lacy about the grades and all. I just knew from personal experience that there might be a different way to think about the differences in letter grades. She is such a good student, and I imagine she can be hard on herself. I remember how it was.”

“Actually, I’m glad for what you said. Your grandmother can’t have been easy to please—at least I imagine that from just having professional business dealings with her. She was a hard lady much of the time.”

Sammi Jo nodded, wiping her hands on the napkin he had produced. “That would be putting it mildly. On the one hand, she was hard. But on the other, she took my sister and me in and raised us when she could have easily put us in some fancy boarding school and been done with it. But she taught us a lot, and in her own way, she taught us that she loved us too. But I will forever wish she had not done this final thing as sort of her last hurrah to her power. It will affect so many lives in ways she never gave a thought to sometimes.

“What if I can’t hold the ranch together? What happens to all the hundreds of people, the families who have lived and worked this ranch for their own generations? Did she not give a thought to them? Where do they go? There aren’t that many big ranches left in this world where their way of life can survive, where their skills are needed. I have to at least try to keep them here on the land that is as much theirs as it is mine. Sorry. I got carried away.”

Beaudry was silent for a few moments. Had she sounded like a babbling fool? Laurel always tried to tone down her soapbox moments. Where was her sister when she was

needed?

“Don’t apologize for caring about those hardworking men and women. That you gave even one thought to them when this happened to you is pretty amazing. And I am finding that I have to revise some of my long-held notions about you and your family. Not all at once, mind you,”—he smiled and motioned his hand—“but there are moments when you do surprise.”

Why did it feel as if she had just been awarded something akin to the Nobel Peace Prize? A Hawkes—Beaudry Hawkes, to be more precise—had simply made an observation about her, and yet, it made her feel like skipping across the way to the refreshment table, high heels, and all. And what would happen if she in turn admitted to the man next to her that he’d had his share of surprises for her as well? He wasn’t all pompous and know-it-all... most of the time. And he hadn’t belittled or laughed at her once. Instead, he had been more complimentary than he had ever been before, even when Lacy wasn’t around to hear. Had she misjudged him in some way?

A chair scraped across the tile floor, and Miss Crawford appeared in it next to Beaudry. Her smile of apology was for him, not her.

“I finally managed to escape for a bit and wanted to be here when they hand out the art awards. Where did Lacy get off to? She left you two on your own?” She finally tossed a smile and glance in Sammi Jo’s direction.

“With her friends right now,” Beaudry responded. For some reason, he didn’t seem as warm toward the woman as he had earlier. Sammi Jo needed to delve into the subject of Miss Crawford further when they were next alone. They needed to have no surprises if they were to stay on the road to matrimony.

“Well, I’ll keep you company, then.” Any closer and the woman would be sitting in his chair too. Sammi Jo took another long sip of her drink.

“Do you have any children, Miss Burkitt?” Cut the wide-eyed innocent act. Were men so blind that they didn’t see through such bad acting? Sammi Jo never had time for such shallow people, and it seemed Miss Crawford was quite comfortable in the hypocrisy she was wallowing in at the moment.

Sammi Jo smiled and responded as sweetly as possible. “No, I do not. At least not yet,” she amended. Let her think on that one. But she couldn’t help adding, “I just have cows and horses right now to deal with... a few thousand of them. Along with the new oil wells and what not too. Guess those will have to keep me busy until those children come along.”

And the woman had been left with no way for a suitable comeback after that. Sammi Jo had learned Cattiness 101 from the world’s best teachers: her sister and grandmother. She could take it to an Olympic-sport level if the teacher wanted. But Miss Crawford evidently knew when to cut and run.

“I better go check in with the art committee before they start. I’ll see you later.” She couldn’t get away fast enough.

“Well, that was a nice chat.” Beaudry’s comment was dry and to the point. “You two might be destined for friends.”

“Look, let’s put the cards on the table. We don’t have time to pussyfoot around such things. Are you and Miss Crawford an item? Because the vows are for two people, not three.”

Beaudry looked a bit stunned for a moment. Then he met her gaze head-on. “Are you jealous?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Sammi Jo didn't expect that to be his reply but bring it on. "Sorry to disappoint. There's no man I would care about enough to make me into a jealous-minded fool. But we are twenty-seven days away from making one huge leap off a cliff, and I intend to make certain it is worth giving up three years of my life for. In that three years, there will be no one else involved—no playdates behind the barn, no business trips with extra luggage, nothing. If you can't handle that, we should not waste any more of our time. Do I make it clear enough even for a Hawkes?"

Beaudry returned her gaze head on. "No sex... except with each other. If I so choose. Got it."

She had not expected the response.

"Youso choose? We have sex ifwesoo choose mister." His eyebrows lifted, and she saw a gleam lit in those jade eyes. "And I won't be choosing. So don't bother with a typically male comeback. So there."

And add a good stomp of foot for measure. She'd just made a silly fool of herself. Beaudry was saved literally by the ringing of a bell. The art auction was about to begin. Lacy came running back to the table and sat in the chair next to Sammi Jo, her body alive with anticipation. Sammi Jo would be fine—she'd just ignore the man beside her for the rest of the evening and leave as soon as she possibly could.

## Chapter Six

"Lacy, you nevermentioned how good an artist you are," Sammi Jo said, admiring the drawing she held in her hands. When it had come up for bid, Sammi Jo couldn't

believe her eyes. The hummingbird could have been a photograph. A fact she had to verify more than once. “Are you sure this is hand-drawn? The detailing is incredible.”

“You really like it that much?”

“I don’t just like it, I love it. And I am so glad that I outbid everyone for it.” Sammi Jo had been determined to not let the little drawing go home with anyone else. Although when the art committee announced that hers had been the highest bid ever made in their auction, ever, she’d had a moment of anxiety. She had always hated it whenever her grandmother made a spectacle of having the largest bank account in the room and flaunting it. Now, here she had been pushed to do much the same. Granted, it was on a little smaller scale and stage, but it was still a few hundred above the next highest bid. She couldn’t help herself.

“Have you ever thought you might want to be an artist when you grow up? You have such talent right now, it would be a shame not to keep refining it.” They had walked ahead of Beaudry, who had stopped to talk to a fellow rancher. They stopped next to Sammi Jo’s SUV.

“I’d like to learn how to paint next, not just draw. But I don’t really have anyone to teach me how to do that. They only teach that when you get into art in high school. And besides, artists don’t make a lot of money, and it wouldn’t help my dad and uncle on the ranch. I can use my math skills to help them more.”

“I see. You’ve given this some thought. Do you think your dad and uncle need your help?” Sammi Jo suspected that the child was a lot smarter than many around her gave her credit for.

“I hear them talking about how hard the drought is on things and the prices are not good at the markets and all. It’s hard being a rancher. Some of my friends had to move away because they lost their ranches. I don’t want us to lose ours. I can help by

using my math.”

“You are a very wise young lady.”

Beaudry had joined them. With her drawing tucked safely in its folder in the seat beside her, Sammi Jo climbed into the driver’s seat. Through her open window, she gave Lacy a smile and a good night. Beaudry stepped closer, and Sammi Jo stayed still. To the passersby on the sidewalk, it would seem that they were sharing a nice good-night. After all, they were on display, right?

“I heard that you all have begun clearing along Sandy Creek. I might stop by tomorrow and check it out.” Beaudry lowered his voice as he spoke.

“Check it out? Why would you do that? Do you think we don’t know what we’re doing?”

“Calm down, Sammi Jo. Your ranch hands know exactly what they’re doing. I just was letting you know that I might be coming onto Burkitt land. I didn’t want to be met with a shotgun.”

There was that Beaudry teasing glint for the second time. It might be attractive if she took him seriously, but it wasn’t ever a good thing to take a man like him seriously. “That Beaudry could charm the pants right off every female between here and Dallas if he put his mind to it. Beware of men like him.” Those had been her own grandmother’s words on more than one occasion. Then why did she up and stick the pair of them together? Her perverse sense of humor on a bad day?

“Come ahead at your own risk.” She put the vehicle in gear, gave a brief wave to Lacy, and not another look at the man with an amused grin on his face.

\*



“Welcome to Coffee and a Chat!” The greeting was loud and happy, the usual sort of greeting one could always expect from Tallie Mayhew and her crew. It was a pleasant pick-one-up if the day was already heading downhill.

Tallie was the owner of the coffee shop. She was the sister of Tucker Mayhew, owner of the Pizza Pie Pantry on the opposite side of the square in town. And Tucker was the significant other to Dawson Hambrick, the Aussie owner of Dawson’s Gastronomic Eatery and Saloon. So between the three of them, they had the east, west, and north sides of the courthouse square sown up, food-wise. Since the jail and sheriff’s office sat on the south side, they didn’t need to worry about any competition.

“It’s about time you got yourself in here. I’ve got the usual coffee and one of my cinnamon rolls warmed and on the table in the back. Let’s go, girlfriend.” Tallie was already leading the way. They slid into opposite sides of the high-backed wooden booth with its bright blue-and-yellow-checked cushion seat covers.

Sammi managed to get a sip of coffee down and swallow one bite of cinnamon roll with all its gooey goodness before the inquisition began.

“You and Beaudry Hawkes? Did the world come to an end and no one told me?”

“What are you talking about? What end of the world?”

“The one you said would happen when someone mentioned you and Beaudry together in the same sentence back a few years ago. So, spill it. What changed?”

Sammi Jo took another bite and then another sip. Tallie was as patient as a red-tailed hawk sitting on a phone pole, watching and waiting for a tiny field mouse to make that one fatal mistake, and then it would pounce on its prey with expert precision. She watched with keen eyes born out of some fifteen years of friendship. They would walk through fire for the other if needed, and literally had, when the old Gastronomic

Eatery had lost its kitchen and they were bent on retrieving the photo of Dawson's parents on their wedding day—the only one in existence. That had earned them a good tongue-lashing from the fire chief, and Tallie had some singed hair, but all was well that ended well.

“It isn't what you think, first of all,” Sammi Jo began in a soft voice. There were only three other tables with patrons at mid-morning and they were up front. The back table had more or less always been reserved for Sammi Jo and Laurel and their coffee chats. “It was some of my grandmother's chicanery with her will. Seems Laurel and I have to sell the ranch lock, stock, and barrel. But if I choose to try to save it and hang on to it, I have to have a partner beside me, one Beaudry Hawkes, for the next three years in a wedded state of matrimonial non-bliss.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Tallie sat staring without saying a word, not even a blink. Sammi Jo was a little worried. “You did hear what I just said, right? All of it? Blink once for no, twice for yes.”

There were two blinks. All was good. She took another sip of coffee.

“I would say that your grandmother was insane, but then she was the sanest person I ever met. Chillingly so. But did she have a brain fart or something? A mini-stroke during that paragraph of her will? Why marriage? Why tohim?”

“I guess it’s tied up in feeling sorry about that old vendetta. Grandpa made Jaxson his main foreman, so that should have been enough, right? But for some reason, along comes Grandmother and she has to one up her husband, I guess. Sacrifice me on the altar to make a point that she was more magnanimous? Did she finally believe that, for whatever antiquated reason, a male has to be at the helm? But why only three years?

“That part doesn’t make that much sense to me, but then none of it really does. I just know that he and I have discussed things. And she made it quite profitable for him to not turn down the deal. So for the next month, or at least twenty-six days, we are seeing if we can get through each day without killing each other and make this work with Lacy involved too. It’s quite a mess the old lady left, unless I run with the cash in hand as far from here as possible. That would be the easy thing to do. But not the best. You know me. Why take the shortcut when you can take the longest route?”

“Why, indeed? I have often asked, usually after I have been talked into going along some of those long routes with you, much to my dismay.” Tallie added a grin at the

end. “Sounds like you have quite a deep well to crawl out of. Beaudry in this for the payoff at the end?”

“He’d be a fool not to be.”

“That good, is it? Then he is no fool. What can I do to help? I volunteer to be maid of honor. As long as there isn’t some hideous dress to wear.”

“The job is yours. And there won’t be any hideous dress—if we make it to that day. Just a visit to the judge’s office and back to work, marking off each day of the thirty-six-month sentence. No one but a Burkitt will ever touch its history. Just keep reminding me.”

“You got it.”

“And what can you tell me about a Crawford that teaches at the elementary school? She’s Lacy’s teacher.”

“Hmm, Crawford? That would be Amanda Crawford, the only child of Leslie and Josh Crawford. He retired from the drugstore about four years ago. You remember him—he made those great chocolate sundaes for us at the old soda fountain. Amanda taught for a while in Dallas after graduating SMU. Then she came here when a spot opened. Why do you want the skinny on her?”

“I just got the impression last night at the open house at the school that she might see herself as the next Mrs. Beaudry Hawkes.”

“I see. Checking out the competition. That sounds a little more promising for those three years to not be so boring, maybe?”

“Okay, get that thought out of your head. I just don’t need any outside interests

cluttering things up and causing problems during this briefbusiness arrangement. That's all it is."

"Did you ask your intended fiancé? Maybe he might be the best source. Of course, after Sandy Lou did her number on him, he hasn't had too much of an itch to scratch along those lines. He's been a dad and mom and doing a pretty good job of it from what I've heard."

"Lacy is an amazing little girl. She is a bit shy, but she has this incredible talent for art, too. I think she might really have some hidden talent there to be explored. She's already moved up a grade in school. She's that smart. And so mannerly and..." Sammi Jo paused. "What's with that look?"

"Sounds like you've fallen for the child at least. I never really knew that you were so fond of kids."

"Well, she's an easy child to like. And that's why I want to make sure this whole marriage thing won't be such an impact on her. That's the last thing I would want."

"Seems like that might not be avoidable. I mean if you were to get attached to her and she to you. She's been without a mother figure in her life for most of it already. But if anyone can figure it out, it's you. And I know her dad will do the same."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Keep telling me that." Sammi Jo stood. "Now put some of that positive spin on us getting the rest of the work done on the new watering hole today with machinery that is being ornery. I've got to go pick up a part that just came in. We'll get together this weekend."

"Give Beaudry my best. And that handsome brother of his too." Tallie added the last quickly as Sammi Jo shot a wave over her shoulder as the door shut behind her.

\*

“Here’s the part.” Sammi Jo stepped up to the side of the bulldozer with its engine compartment opened upward. The person she thought was Ray Donovan, one of the ranch mechanics, was bent almost double, trying to get a stubborn bolt or some such loosened, judging by the colorful words she had heard flying around as she walked up.

If her focus hadn’t still been back at the coffee shop with Tallie’s remarks, she might have realized sooner that the back part of the male bent over the machinery in front of her was in a bit better shape—make that a whole lot better shape—in a pair of nicely fitted jeans. Ray had quite a few extra pounds on him, and the backside of the man in front of her was certainly in great shape. That fact began to sink into her brain just as another colorful word flew.

“Sounds like the machine is getting the better of you, Ray. Didn’t you say that no machine could do that to you? Guess you met your match.”

“Well, since I’m not Ray, I won’t take it personally.” The man stood upright, and she was face-to-face with Beaudry, who looked hot and sweaty and streaked with black grease along one side of his face and down the sleeve of a shirt that had a long tear in the material.

“I would guess that the machine is winning this round by the looks of it. Where’s Ray? And why are you working on Burkitt machinery?”

“Now there is the Sammi Jo I know. Ray had to go to take care of a broken stall door on the stallion barn right quick while we waited for the part you were retrieving. I was here when he got the call, so I said I would get the gasket out of the way so he could switch parts as soon as you got back. Don’t worry. I won’t charge you for my time or the fact your machine ruined one of my favorite shirts. Hand over the part.”

His outstretched hand waited.

“This is Ray’s job.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Well, if you want to get the rest of this work done today before the rains hit later this week, I will say you are wasting daylight by being stubborn. I can finish this in nothing flat, and your ranch hands can get back to work. Or we can stand here and argue. It’s your decision, boss lady.” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the dozer, seemingly content to do nothing.

“You are a most infuriating man, but then you already know that. Here, knock yourself out. And I will buy you another shirt.” She held out the part to him.

“Wise decision. But perhaps you should work a bit on your gratefulness. A shirt would be good, but lunch might sweeten the deal.”

“You want me to feed you too?”

He simply returned her gaze for a few long seconds before saying, “Clock is ticking. Tick, tock.”

“Okay, lunch. When you’re done, come to the foaling barn if you want something to eat.” She didn’t wait for his response. It would be something equally sarcastic, she was sure. She could feel his eyes on her as she walked with purpose in her stride back to her pickup. But she didn’t turn and look back.

And as soon as she took the bend in the road and was out of his sight, she floored the vehicle. She had a sink full of dishes from two meals and lots of picking up to do if he was going to walk into her apartment. Why had she given in to his request for lunch? It was a moment of sheer lunacy, but what else could she say? He had done her a favor, and she had to begrudgingly admit he had saved her time. So, get over it



and the sooner he is fed, the sooner he leaves.

Twenty minutes later, she heard the sound of a truck's engine outside and then a slamming door. Boots sounded on the concrete flooring in the stable hallway below.

"Hello? Anyone here? I smell food. Is this Sammi Jo's Diner?"

"Up here," she called down.

The boots next sounded on the staircase that led to the loft apartment, then stopped once he reached the landing.

"Sorry if you expected to dine in the great hall at the main house. I moved over here after we buried Grandmother. The main house just seemed twice as big with both her and Laurel gone. I've always liked this space, and it's enough for me right now. The bathroom is through that door beside you. I put out fresh towels. Lunch will be on the table in another ten minutes or so. Tea? Coffee? Water?"

"Tea is fine—with a lot of ice is even better." He stepped into the bath area and closed the door. Sammi Jo tried to keep her mind on what she needed to do to be a good hostess. She wasn't that used to entertaining on a one-on-one scale. If they entertained, it was usually stock buyers or local politicians or some such, and the staff at the main house made everything perfect.

She set two places at the small dining table she had refinished herself after she found it in the attic at the house. The same with the chairs. She had set it all up in the small alcove off the kitchen area. Across from it was the larger, more open space with an L-shaped couch and a rocking chair with a table and lamp. The TV was hung above the stone-faced fireplace. Sammi Jo had tried to make the room feel homey and had hung some landscapes of Texas wildflowers and the Hill Country. Through another archway sat the queen-sized bed with the white draping she had hung on its canopy

cover that matched the curtains at the wide window fitted where the hay loft door had been. She loved to lay in her bed and watch the moonrise on star-filled nights after the sun had set in a blazing glory of color. It might not be the magnificence of the main house, but it was her own corner of the ranch right now, and it fit her.

She was just setting the tea glasses on the table when the door opened and Beaudry stepped out, the grease noticeably gone from his face and hands. Hands that were still buttoning his shirt across a chest that was definitely a perfect specimen of tanned male muscles in rock-solid display. A smattering of dark hair was evident just before the last button filled its hole. Sammi Jo felt a little nigger of disappointment. Then she wanted to kick herself for even noticing.

“Perfect timing. Food is on the table. Hope you like beef enchiladas, salad, and cornbread.”

Beaudry had a strange expression on his face as he sat down opposite her. He placed the napkin across his lap and then took a sip of the tea. “This is quite a surprise. First the fact that you are living up here. And then the fact that you cooked this food, which looks and smells great.” He stopped and took a forkful in his mouth. She waited for the verdict.

“And it tastes as good as it smells. I am impressed. Or did you have it brought over from the main kitchen?”

“You should have stopped while you were ahead,” she responded with a sharp look as she handed him the breadbasket. “I do know how to cook, and I cooked all of this.”

He set the fork full of food down on the side of his plate. “That was rude of me. I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just I had no idea that this side of you existed. I am surprised yet again.”

“Apology accepted. Thanks to a patient cook at the main house who didn’t mind being bothered by a kid with lots of questions following along in her footsteps, I did manage to learn a thing or two about cooking in my teen years. Grandmother thought it a waste of time, but Grandpa would just shush her and say that it might get me a husband one day.” She caught herself. “Guess he might have been wrong. Leave it to Grandmother to throw money at the problem instead. That was always her answer to everything.”

“Your grandfather was a good man. He had the patience of Job to have been married so long to your grandmother. I never figured out how such a pair made a go of it for more than sixty years. And I hope you know I don’t mean that in an unkind way.”

“You’re just stating truth. None of us ever understood it. But whatever it was, it worked for them.”

“Do you think a marriage can last that long today?”

Sammi Jo gave it some consideration before she spoke. “I would hope so. It takes a certain type of person, I think. You can’t go in thinking, ‘Well, if I don’t like it, I can always get a divorce and move on.’ Too many people think that way these days, so there’s no will or want to tough it out and make it better. At least that’s my thinking. Of course, there are people who should never have thought of marrying in the first place. I wouldn’t want to be in a position like that.”

“Like my history?”

“Your business is yours. I’m sure you started out attracted to Sandy Lou’s looks. What red-blooded male wouldn’t do that? But looks fade. Sex isn’t enough to keep a relationship going over the long haul. So what’s left? You better have thought things through before that reality hits you up the side of the head one morning. Too often that’s when males decide to go in search of greener pastures. I’m just saying there

needs to be something more to a relationship than looks and hot sex, because neither of those things last.”

“You think that’s what happened in my case? I wanted just the hot sex and great-looking body to interest me?”

“What your interests are along those lines is not my business. But I didn’t necessarily mean you. I’m sure that you had your reasons. I’m not judging, so...”

“It’s okay, Sammi Jo. I know what you meant. But when two people go into it with two far different reasons and expectations, well, there will be trouble from the start. And when one wants to live the single life at the same time, a husband and child can get in the way. But I don’t make any excuses, and what is done is done.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Was that the crux of the problem with you two?” Sammi Jo caught herself. “I’m sorry. It’s really not any of my business what happened in your marriage. That had to be a tough road at times. But you have raised a wonderful young lady who adores you. That counts for a lot in my book. I might have misjudged you a time or two, and for that, I am sorry.”

“No apology needed. Sandy Lou was a learning curve if ever there was one. She wasn’t ready for a real marriage, and she certainly wasn’t ready for the fact that having a fair amount of land and cattle didn’t mean they had the bank account to go along with it. I also learned that sometimes love equates to the amount of greenbacks in the bank.” He paused and then added, “But the story is a bit different in our case. It’s all those dollars in the Burkitt vault that is giving me pause. Money can corrupt. It can change a person’s whole dynamic. I want to give my daughter everything I can to get her a good start toward building her own dreams down the road. Money is nothing but a tool. It can’t take over your whole life or else you lose what’s really important... beginning with your soul. Sorry about the soapbox. And present company is certainly excluded in a lot of what I just said.”

Beaudry gave her one of those smiles that managed to flip her insides upside down. She had to catch her breath. She had a flash of memory of the first time she had seen his smile. She had happened onto him while at a horse show. He was leaning over the stall door, an apple in one hand and a pocket knife in the other. He was quartering the fruit, then feeding it to his horse. And he was smiling at the animal. In that moment, she had experienced a burning desire deep down in her core to want to know how it would feel to have that smile turned upon her. It shook her up. But she tried to not let it show. She had turned away very quickly and walked smack into a locked door. People had laughed, and then she had to endure the doctor at the stock show—a vet,

not a people doctor—trying to stem the bleeding.

Funny that memory should pop up at that moment. She hadn't thought of it in years. She had just graduated from high school and they were competing in a horse show. She tried to remember if he had laughed along with the rest, but that part was fuzzy. What she did remember was that he left the very next day for basic training. And so had Sandy Lou. They had eloped, and Sammi Jo had pushed the pair out of her thoughts.

She would be mindful of closed doors and such from that point forward. She wasn't about to let a man's smile make a fool of her again.

"So, I never thought to ask before, but is there some guy I need to keep an eye out for in dark alleys? Someone you're dating who might not like this arrangement of ours? Am I poaching some other fellow's girl?"

She shook her head. "Don't worry about dark alleys. There's no one remotely special enough to fear meeting the wrath of. My dating life is few and far between. I happen to be very selective. Too selective, as my sister often reminds me. But I don't care. I have to know that it's me a guy is interested in and not the name and bank account he envisions."

He nodded. "Very wise indeed. And there is something else I have learned about you that shatters my preconceived notion about the spoiled rich girl I first thought of you as. You have to be careful on the other side of that same coin. There are men out there who would give a lot to be in my shoes right now. The male equivalent to a Sandy Lou. Guess we're lucky in that we both are going into this deal—if we do go into it at all—without rose-colored glasses." Then he finished off his glass of tea. "I think our plan of letting the town see us together is moving along. We seem to still be number one topic at the local gossip sessions, or so I hear."

“I’m so pleased. Why can’t people get a life and focus on something important?”

“Well, other people’s lives seem so much more exciting, I guess, when you’re on the outside looking in. We’ll step things up with the fair coming up and the fall stock show. Then it’ll be time for the showstopper.”

“Showstopper?”

“Will they or won’t they walk down that aisle? I hear the bets are already being placed on that one.”

Sammi Jo knew he was trying to make light of the situation. But for some reason, she couldn’t match it.

“There went the smile. What’s wrong, Sammi? I hope you know that you can talk to me. All joking aside, we are in this together. Don’t ever hesitate to get whatever is bothering you out on the table for us to look at and work through if we can. That is the only way this has a chance to work.”

She stood as he did, obviously needing to be someplace else.

“You really think this has a chance of working? Or am I just being foolish for even trying?”

He turned on the second step of the stairs and faced her, putting them almost eye level to each other. His gaze was serious as he met hers.

“I think you’re hopeful. Because this dream of yours means more than anything to you. And you are fueled by an honest intent to help a lot of people you care about. I would give anything to have a crystal ball to see how this turns out, but I don’t. One step at a time, Sammi Jo. And remember... you aren’t alone.” He wrapped his hand

around hers and her surprise held her frozen to the spot.

“Your heart is huge. I know that now. I know you are a fighter. I also know that your grandmother underestimated you. You take after your grandpa, and that is why I agreed to see where this takes us for the next few weeks. And if we take that leap off the cliff, as you liken it to, well, it will be with our eyes wide open. And the next meal is my treat. We have a date for Friday night. Pick you up at five.”

For a moment, she thought he might actually lean in for a kiss. Instead, he settled for a squeeze of her hand. But that was okay with her. Kisses would definitely cloud things. And that was the last thing she needed. It was a good thing she didn't like wine, because Beaudry was a heady wine she needed to steer clear of. And suddenly an image floated through her mind of wineglasses and satin sheets with Beaudry beneath them and nothing else between the two of them but a wisp of material... well, she felt the heat begin to rise up the back of her neck. The last thing she needed was him to see her blush. She needed to block thoughts of wine and bedrooms and kisses.

But the man...he might be another story. How did she do that?

## Chapter Seven

“There he is.” Jaxson's words preceded him into the barn. He took a moment to deposit the large bag of oat grain on top of the others he had already unloaded. Wiping his brow on the sleeve of his shirt in a practiced manner, he blew out a breath while his gaze remained on Beaudry. “The man of the hour.”

Beaudry tossed him a look over the saddle he had just landed on top of his horse's back, fingers automatically going to the cinching routine he could do blindfolded. “What's that supposed to mean? Or do I want to know?”

“Well, the usual talk around the tables at the Coffee and Chat about the drought and



the latest rise or drop in cattle and hog prices has been replaced with the ‘goings on’ involving my little brother and a certain heiress. It’s a change of pace, but I don’t know if I can handle being related to such a celebrity.”

“No doubt you’ll do just fine,” Beaudry shot back, making one more adjustment to his saddle. “Just remember that you agreed this was the course we needed to take that day in Matt’s office. ‘Break the news on the good neighbors of Burkitt easy and they won’t cause such a stir.’ Or are you jealous that gossip about your own bachelor shenanigans might have been shelved for the time being?” That was a jab of the good-natured brother-to-brother kind, accompanied by the usual gotcha grin they both understood so well.

“Humph.” Jaxson shook his head. “That’s a dog that doesn’t hunt any longer in these parts. Only one Hawkes’s bachelor status is in question in this corner of the world. And the interest is growing by the minute. The best part is standing back and watching you squirm around like a big worm caught on the end of a fishing hook, about to be tossed into the deep end of the pond. And swallowed up by a determined barracuda.”

“Has the heat already gotten to you, brother? Last time I looked, we don’t have any barracuda in ponds around here.”

“Well, I guess I was trying to find the right fish for this analogy, seeing as how, in about three minutes, there’s going to be one sailing through that barn door with her sharp teeth snapping. And I’ll just go out the back door to leave you dangling on that hook.” Jaxson was already headed toward the tack room with its escape route far from the main entrance to the barn.

What in the world? Beaudry didn’t have to remain in the dark long. A familiar voice sounded behind him; he had waited too long to escape. It wasn’t a barracuda that swam through his mind in that moment, but a full-sized shark, evidently hungry.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Well, there you are, you sly cowboy. Who knew you had some devious brains under that hat, after all?”

He didn’t turn around but kept his gaze intent on the horse in front of him. The sooner he had the saddle in place, the sooner he had his means of escape at hand. “Don’t know what sly man you think you’ve found, but you might be in the wrong place. In fact, I know you are. This place is off limits. Or did you forget that part of our deal?”

“I don’t forget anything, Beau, not where my favorite ex is involved. I just thought I should pay you a visit now that I’m back home for a while and all. See what you and my daughter have been up to. But I didn’t have to wait long to hear. My, my. Seems you have become quite the busy man. Maybe you’re smarter than I gave you credit for.”

“I don’t like riddles and have even less time for your chitchat.” He rested an arm along the top of the saddle, finally turning toward his unwelcome visitor.

Sandy Lou Betancourt Hawkes stood in one of her usual poses, giving time for those minions around her to give ample homage to what she envisioned was her divine presence in their midst. Better still, giving her better leverage to trap some unsuspecting male fly in her sticky spider web to be devoured in her leisure. She had changed. She’d become even more the black widow spider he had morphed her into in the far back of his brain, where things like rattlers and quicksand congregated. Beaudry shook his head. Why had he taken so long to see the woman for what most others knew her to be?

She still wore jeans two sizes too small for her body. How she managed to even get

into them without help of the heavy-duty kind was a mystery he did not care to figure out. The hot pink blouse had a few buttons missing from their buttonholes, leaving the mounds of cleavage more than on ample display. Pity the unsuspecting male who would find out just how much of her was really plastic and not nature's own gift.

The remainder of the buttoned material looked to be straining to keep from popping things open the rest of the way. When he had married her, she had been a peroxidized blonde. Now, she was channeling her inner being, her hair was still long, but as black as crude oil, making her skin appear even paler beneath the bright-red lipstick and heavily made-up eyes and cheeks. Her nails, long and razor-sharp, still were painted to match the lips. What had he ever seen in her? All he saw now was trouble with a capital T.

His senses were on alert.

"We agreed that you would stay off this ranch. Any communications would be between your attorney and mine. And that has worked well these past few years. You must want something really bad to be here now. Make it fast and then get off this ranch. And I don't need to remind you to stay away from my daughter either. Your parental rights were severed, remember?"

"Now, now, Beaudry Hawkes. You are still as sanctimonious as you always were. But then I guess you think you have the right to be Mr. High and Mighty now that you're sniffing around that pot of gold at the end of the Burkitt rainbow." She purred over the last few words, sidling closer to where he stood, two long fingers walking their way along the back of the saddle and sending shivers of the not-so-nice kind along Beaudry's arm. He steeled himself to not jerk away. His experience told him it was best to wait and watch and be ready for her venom-laced jabs that would make themselves known sooner than later.

"There isn't any pot of gold, so bark up someone else's tree."

“Oh, there is gold alright. If rumors are true, you fell into a pile of horse manure and are about to come up smelling like a million barrels of crude oil. Good for you.”

“Cut to it, Sandy Lou. You want something. What is it?”

The cold glint in those flat, brown eyes narrowed.

“My name is Sandra, and you’d do well to remember it. And I intend to keep an eye on things around here for the foreseeable future. I might have agreed to certain things between us a bit too hastily where it came to our kid. I have a very smart Dallas attorney now who just might teach Matt Mateo a thing or two about custody battles. Maybe it’s time I decided I want to get to know my daughter. She’s old enough to need a woman’s touch. Some things a cowhand can’t teach, but a mother can.”

Beaudry felt the anger boiling upward from the pit of his stomach. But he had learned long ago to not play his hand too soon in front of the woman, even though it was hard not to do. She clearly had some devious plan to wreak havoc among them all. He had to protect Lacy, and the only way to do that was to beat this woman at her own twisted game—whatever it was.

“That lets you out, then. You are as far from being mother material as a woman can get. You know where the front gate is. Use it.” He swung up into the saddle, and she had to make a quick side step to get out of the big bay’s path. A step that put one of her flimsy sandals into a fresh pile of manure. Beaudry tapped a finger to the brim of his hat, the smile he shot at her not at all apologetic, then left her fuming in his wake.

\*

An afternoon breeze had risen to bring the heat down a few notches. A few clouds puffed up to the north, but nothing to worry about. It was fall in most places to the far north and east, but in their area of Texas, the calendar and weather did not often

speak to each other. Still, there needed to be a way to wash out the memory of the meeting with Sandy Lou from his mind. What better way than to take his daughter on an impromptu fishing outing? Her eyes had lit up with unbridled happiness when she had gotten out of the car in the driveway after school.

“Fishing? Are we going fishing? Is it a special day?” She came running up to Beaudry as he stood with fishing rods and tackle box in hand. Beast was already seated in their transportation, his huge head propped on the open side of the rear window of the vehicle.

“Yes, it’s a special day. Take your best daughter fishing day...didn’t you hear about it? Here, give Seraphina your backpack and let’s not keep those fish waiting.”

“Don’t worry about dinner tonight, Seraphina,” he said as the backpack was handed over to the waiting woman. “Lacy and I will supply our dinner tonight.”

The woman nodded with a knowing grin on her face. “Well, there’ll be a casserole in the refrigerator, just in case those fish have other ideas. Have fun, you two!”

The pair jumped in the jeep that was often used for off-road adventures and checking fence lines and fire roads. It was a favorite ride of Lacy’s and ratcheted up her enthusiasm level even more. Her laughter never failed to lift Beaudry’s heart.

“Looks like there are a few ripples out there, but nothing to disturb our chances.” Beaudry made the observation as they arrived a few minutes later at the stocked fishing pond that also doubled as a pretty good swimming hole on the ranch. It was half shaded by a circle of tall oaks at one end. The breeze felt a few degrees cooler coming off the water and filtering through the shady branches. They fished in silence for the first few minutes. Beaudry smiled, watching the seriousness cross his daughter’s face, a slight tip of her tongue caught between her teeth as she was intent on willing some huge fish to take her bait first.

He inched his way over, careful to not scare away her imaginary giant from taking a bite off her hook. He joined her seated on a huge fallen tree at the edge of the water. His gaze swept over the scenery around them. The heaviness on his shoulders had all but disappeared. Funny how the spot on the old fallen log, in total silence, was the perfect balm to whatever ailed a person—given his favorite person was seated next to him. Lacy made everything seem possible and put so much of his life into perspective. Someday, he hoped to have the words to convey all of that to her. But for the present, it was one of those perfect moments to snap a brain photo of and tuck away in the center of his chest.

“I’ve got one!” Lacy’s sudden shout brought the reality into focus, and Beaudry sat his rod aside but put away the urge to reach out and take over her rod and reel and bring in the fish for her. This was Lacy’s moment. He had to be the cheering section.

“Easy. Remember, keep your focus on the end of the line. Don’t rush it... smooth and easy, reel it in, feel the tug, and adjust your reaction to it. Don’t worry about how big... you’ll see that soon enough. Just concentrate on bringing that bobbing cork and its prize all the way home.”

Lacy had risen to her feet, the sliver of tongue now more in evidence as her concentration was centered on the bobbing and weaving bright yellow cork. It would disappear and then surface, edging closer to them as Lacy fought to keep her rod and reel steady. Beaudry had begun teaching her the fine art of fishing at the ripe old age of five with her first cheap plastic rod and reel that made her feel like her dad and uncle on their fishing outings. She had graduated after being an apt pupil into her own real rod and reel on her seventh birthday. At eight, almost nine now, she was more than a novice. Beaudry felt pride as he watched her. She was determined to land it all by herself, no help from Dad. So he sat, hands fisted together, praying that the fish would cooperate.

“Look at him. He’s huge!” The words came out through gritted teeth.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Beaudry stood, reaching for the hand net. “A little closer, and I’ll get a scoop on him.”

The fish’s nose broke water, and with a quick movement, Beaudry netted him and the two of them brought the fighting fish onto the bank. “Let’s measure him, Daddy. He’s really big.”

The measuring tape came out of the tackle box. Lacy had also been taught all the rules involved in fishing, including the need for a license, which she had treated like a special award in itself. Quickly, he measured the fish. The sigh of letdown was deep and combined from them both.

“It’s a half-inch too short. I’m sorry, Lacy.”

She shook her head. “I know. It’s rules. But he did put up a good fight. And I’ll catch him again when he is bigger.” A couple of minutes later, the fish had been pardoned and disappeared into the depths of the pond once more. They sat side by side, sharing a couple of cold bottles of water.

“I’m proud of your attitude about the fish.”

“Well, it’s the law. You always said that counted first. I did really want to keep it though. What if we don’t catch anything else?”

“Well, Seraphina did bail us out, just in case. So we won’t starve.” They both shared a laugh.

“Will we see Miss Sammi Jo again soon?” That question caught him off guard for a second. But how surprising that his daughter had the woman in her thoughts... much at the same time he had them. He took another sip of the water.

“I expect we will see her soon again. In fact, I’m taking her to dinner tomorrow evening while you’re at your scout meeting. Uncle Jax will be taking you and picking you up. You okay with me doing that? Taking her to dinner?”

Lacy looked up at him with a considering silence for a moment. Then a slow grin appeared. “Is she going to be your girlfriend? Because that is okay if she is. I just wanted to say that.”

Beaudry took in the information with a slow nod. You opened the door, now what? He took another sip before taking the next step.

“We’re friends. I think we’re good friends even. We haven’t decided on being boyfriend-girlfriend yet. But what do you think if we were to do that?”

“Dad, is this one of those talks like some of my friends have had to go through with their mom or dad about them having a boyfriend or girlfriend? Because it’s kinda weird and all.”

“Weird in that you don’t like the idea?”

Lacy let out a sigh and shook her head. “Sometimes parents do ask crazy stuff. But I like her a lot. She treats me nice and talks to me about all kinds of stuff we both like. She really doesn’t treat me like I’m a kid she has to be nice to because of you. She likes me, and I like her... but I do so hope you like her a lot and then she could like you a lot and then...” Her voice trailed off.

Beaudry digested the conversation to that point. It was enlightening. “And then you



hope for something more? Lacy, have you missed having a mom in your life? Have you missed not getting to know about your real mom?"

She vehemently shook her head, her twin pigtails almost giving her whiplash. "No way. I don't really think about having a real mom. She didn't want to be my mom and that's okay. But it would be nice to have a mom someday—the right one. Someone kinda nice and smart and pretty like Miss Sammi Jo. And she would have to be really nice to you too. Because I love you and want you to be happy. And she has to like Beast and Uncle Jax and even fishing."

"Well." Beaudry grinned as he met her gaze. "Not too many ladies tend to like fishing. We can't hold that against her if she doesn't."

"True. Then it will just be something you and me can do together. And maybe she and I would do something together that you don't like doing, and that would be okay too."

"Sounds like you have things all figured out."

"Kids can do that a lot faster than a lot of grown-ups, Dad. So, how much do you like her? Have you told her you like her? You should do that. And that she is pretty. Girls like that sort of thing."

Here he had come to have some time and a talk with his eight, almost nine, daughter. And she ended up being the one to put the discussion into perspective in less than five minutes. Her advice was solid. So how did he go about figuring out if the lady in question could like him back? He was tempted to ask his smart daughter but figured that would be too much information he might not be able to handle. Shaking his head, he simply leaned over and gave Lacy a hug that said it all.

Now he had to figure out what Sammi Jo might have to say.

## Chapter Eight

“I’m sorry, SammiJo. I hated to do this on such short notice and all, let alone do it at all.” Beaudry’s tone was sincere and apologetic.

Truth be told, Sammi had fretted over the prospect of a dinner date with Beaudry—alone—since he’d made the invitation three days prior. And not to mention how many changes in wardrobe she had gone through just that morning alone. But when the phone rang and it was Beaudry, explaining he had to cancel out on the evening, instead of the breath of relief, she now felt a twinge of disappointment at the prospect of the evening ahead with just herself for company.

But Beaudry was a dad who took his parenting responsibilities squarely on his own shoulders. Someone else might have not let a little bit of fever and cough interrupt their plans and left the child in the company of a babysitter anyway.

“I totally understand. The most important thing is that Lacy gets to feeling better. And I’m sure having you there will speed that up too. I know she doesn’t want to miss a moment of fair week coming up. And there are plenty of other days to have dinner plans.”

“The fact that you are willing to reset our plans and give me another chance to show my charming side sounds hopeful, at least.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

She had to laugh at the picture that conjured. “Beaudry Hawkes has a charming side? Now that is something I must see. So that gets you another dinner chance right there.” Since when did it come so easy to actually tease back with a member of the opposite sex? And Beaudry, at that?

She also discovered that the man had a really nice, deep-toned laugh that came easy, with enough charm to make it hard to not be forgiving of him. It was another facet of his that made her erect yet another caution flag in her brain. How often had she hoped her grandmother’s softer tones and gentler turns had signaled a better change in their relationship, only to have it all be dashed by stark coldness in the next moment? People could always disappoint in a heartbeat. That was a tough wall of hers to let anyone have access to the doorway too soon.

“Please tell Lacy I hope she feels better soon. And if you two need anything, just give me a call, and I’ll be glad to help out.”

There was a few seconds’ pause. “Thanks, I’ll tell her. And your offer is much appreciated.” His tone was warm and sincere. “Just know that I’m truly sorry we can’t make that dinner date together tonight. I was looking forward to it.”

Sammi Jo sat holding a silent phone in her hand for a while after he hung up. The disappointment only seemed to grow. And now, she was going to be faced with probably opening a can of soup or making a sandwich of some kind for herself. Probably much the same thing he would be doing in his kitchen later. And that’s when a thought hit her. Did she dare? It was spontaneous, and she wasn’t that great on that score. How often had spur of the moments failed, and she had slowly turned into a proactive planner to the extreme. But she felt inspired, and that was a first.

Nothing ventured... what did she have to lose? Just being neighborly was a good enough reason. Right?

\*

While Lacy was upstairs, hopefully finishing out a nap with Beast beside her, Beaudry made some phone calls from his office in the barn, including one to Matt, his attorney, to touch base about his ex's surprise visit. Matt was able to reassure him a bit; he would do some checking and find out more about why she had shown up back in Burkitt after professing loudly to everyone that she didn't care to set foot on its dusty streets ever again. No matter what, Beaudry would stay on his guard until she left. And until that time, the front gate was staying shut, with visitors having to ring ahead to the house or barns for entrance. No more surprise drop-ins.

And that was why he stopped in his tracks as he came out of the barn and headed toward the ranch house.

The unexpected sight of the Aces High SUV parked in the driveway threw him off for a moment. As he began moving closer again, he could make out Jaxson's low rumble through the screened door, speaking to someone inside the kitchen. Beaudry took the three steps onto the screened-in back porch area in one bound, then quickly pulled the dirty work boots off and placed them on the rack for cleaning later. In his stocking feet, he pushed open the door and stepped inside to be met by an amazing aroma of something cooking in a pot on the stove and the sight of his brother, a thick sandwich in hand, grinning at the other occupant, who was the biggest surprise of all.

"I hope you don't mind uninvited guests dropping in without even a call first," the woman in a blue-and-white gingham apron over blue jeans and a sky-blue tank top said with a somewhat tentative smile, a large stirring spoon in one hand, and a potholder in the other. She seemed to fit right in with her surroundings, even if she looked a little nervous.

“I’d say he’s already had quite a day of surprising drop-in guests.” Jaxson took another bite of the sandwich and reached for a canned soda from the refrigerator beside him. “This sandwich is amazing, but I am off to finish up for the day. Thanks again for the food, Sammi Jo. I meant what I said—if you ever want to give up ranching, you could open up your own restaurant, and I’d be a steady customer. See you later.” As he passed Beaudry, he gave him a cheeky wink that added much more to his leaving. Beaudry felt it prudent to ignore his message.

“I’m sorry,” Sammi Jo was saying. “You had other guests? Did I come at a bad time? I just wanted to bring over a pot of the homemade beef stew that always made me feel better when I was sick. And then I had to add some sourdough bread, which is about to come out of the oven. There’s also ham slices and cheddar cheese for sandwiches if you are that hungry. I could toast that for you if you like. Or I can just leave it all for you and Lacy and get out of your way.”

“No!” He was quick to end that idea.

She smiled. “You must be really hungry then.”

“I had no idea I was until I smelled that delicious stew as I came into the house. Did you or one of the cooks...?”

She stifled a laugh. Hey, he was trying to be diplomatic with his question.

“Yes, it is mystew. One of the things I learned to cook in high school and have improved upon over the years, I am pleased to say. Now the sourdough loaf is my fourth attempt, and I am still working on it, but seems your brother was either just starving and would eat the first loaf no matter what, or it might just be passable. I hope you don’t mind that I took this chance to show up and bring you and Lacy something so that you didn’t have to worry about cooking. You mentioned this was your housekeeper’s day off.”

Beaudry moved to stand closer to her stance at the stove, his gaze appreciative of the food in the stewpot and of the woman standing in front of him. Was the rise in color along her cheeks due to the heat from the stove or just maybe his presence? That could be a hopeful sign. Either way, the color looked nice.

“First of all, you would never be termed an unwanted drop-in,” he began, and then his smile broadened into a natural grin. “At least not any longer. You’re welcome here anytime. Anytime at all.” And that gave them both pause. The air was heavier to catch hold of and draw inside in.

“Daddy! I’m thirsty. Are you down there?” The small voice broke the impasse. Beaudry turned his attention to a cabinet beside him, drawing down a glass and heading toward the refrigerator.

“I’m here. On my way with the water,” his voice carried upstairs. At the doorway, he looked back at Sammi. “I’ll also deliver the good news to my child about our dinner and our guest.”

A few minutes later, with aromatic stew ladled in bowls and plates with sandwiches, the trio made their own version of a picnic in Lacy’s bedroom. With her ensconced against a mound of pillows and a bed tray across her lap, Sammi Jo and Beaudry sat in chairs on either side of the bed with their own lap trays. They had their meal and laughed their way through one of Lacey’s favorite comedy shows on television. She managed to last to the end of the show before it was clear she was having trouble keeping her eyes open.

Sammi Jo and Beaudry cleared up the leftovers of the picnic, and Sammi left him to tuck in his daughter. He rejoined her in the kitchen, where she had secured the leftovers in the refrigerator and cleared away any signs that the kitchen had been in use.

“Sammi Jo Burkitt’s list of surprises keeps growing.” Beaudry stepped in to dry the last of the pans and put them away in their proper places.

“I have a list? What’s on it?”

“Well, we can definitely say now that you are an accomplished cook. And we need to add that you know how to decorate a home and make it inviting to visitors. Your loft is the example of that. You have a way with you when it comes to charming and caring for children. My daughter would give you two thumbs-up and many gold stars. She has shared her opinion with me. All of that in addition to being a savvy businesswoman and one heck of a rancher, and you just might be deserving of that award you won back in high school.”

Sammi Jo shook her head. “You remember that?”

“Of course, I do. How often does one get to say that they know the Homemaker of Tomorrow? I sat behind you in that class for a semester, remember?”

There went that soft color across her cheeks again. “You made me nervous.” She looked like she wanted to take those words back as soon as they were out.

“Really? Now that is interesting. Tell me why I made you nervous.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Because I didn’t know if you were going to put glue in my hair or sneak that awful green grass snake inside my backpack. You did both on more than one occasion. Why else do you think I would be nervous?”

He had the decency to look ashamed. “Oh, no reason, I guess. Just silly pranks, but I am sorry about them now. The snake was a bit much. Too late to ask forgiveness on that one?”

\*

Beaudry Hawkes had always had an abundant supply of charm when he applied it. Only that smile, with the dimple in his chin and the slight set of his head, had never been turned in her direction before. And those eyes! They wove a hypnotic green glow and warmed a path all the way into the intended’s chest and did funny things with the organ beating there. It made thoughts of moonlight and champagne kisses and satin sheets all float unbidden through her brain. No man had ever sparked that sort of reaction from her, and she knew she was in very deep water without a lifeline close at hand.

“I’ll have to think about both those requests—forgiveness and the stew. I’ll let you know.”

“I’m very glad you came over here this evening.” He said it with sincerity in his tone and his gaze as they came to a halt beside the Aces High truck. Beaudry stowed the pots and pan in the back seat and shut the door, facing her in the light from the porch. There was a lingering moment before either spoke; she continued to stare at him while he stood with his hand poised on the door handle.



“Second thoughts on how much you liked the meal? You look like something might be upsetting you now.”

There was a quick shake of his head and an attempt to bring back a partial smile, but it fell short.

“There was nothing wrong with the meal at all... nor the company. But I know I gave you a pep talk about how, if something needs to be laid out on the table and talked about, we need to do just that. Well, it’s time to take my own advice.” It was clear that whatever was coming was not a subject he cared for. “You might remember Jaxson alluded to an unexpected visitor that came by today before your arrival? The terms uninvited and unwanted can also be tacked on.”

Sammi nodded, her hip settling against the vehicle’s door, trying to prepare for whatever this bit of unsettling news was they needed to talk about. “That’s right. So who was it?”

“Sandy Lou. Showed up like the bad penny she is. The question I don’t know the answer to is, why now? I have suspicions, but that’s all I have.”

This news made Sammi Jo’s stomach give a lurch. “I see. She just came back to town with no warning? It’s been a while since she’s even come around that I know of, even if her stepmother is still here. But that’s her only connection that I’m aware of.” Then Sammi Jo had another thought that was even more upsetting. “Oh no. Does this have to do with Lacy? Did Lacy see her? Is this her usual habit, dropping in unexpected to see Lacy?”

“No, Lacy didn’t see her, and no, it is not like her at all. We had an agreement when she signed over custody of Lacy to me. Only and until Lacy ever decided she wanted anything to do with her would we ever consider amending any agreements. Sandy Lou was banned from this ranch. And for the foreseeable future, that’s why the gate

will be shut. I know Jaxson let you in when you arrived. I'm going to give you the code so you can come and go as you need to, even if one of us isn't here to let you through the gate. Matt is trying to find out what she is up to."

"But you have an idea, don't you? I can see that there is something in the back of your mind. Does it have to do with us and our...arrangement?" Might as well get it out there. Sammi inwardly braced for whatever this next hurdle might be. They seemed to come in their direction in a never-ending series.

"She mentioned knowing that there was a pot of Burkitt gold in my future. And then she followed it up with one of her empty threats—getting an attorney and trying to get back into Lacy's life. She claims that Lacy is old enough now to need a 'mother's touch.' That's a joke," he said, the last words bit out as if he'd tasted something bitter. "She was never anything close to being a mother to Lacy. From the moment our daughter was born, Sandy Lou had the nurses keep her away. And then after she came home with Lacy, the housekeeper and I were the sole caregivers, while Sandy Lou found plenty of reasons to take off on week-long trips. The private investigator's reports were enough that the judge had no problem giving me sole custody of my child. And until today, my threats to make her life miserable if she showed her face around Lacy have held her off. But she smells the one thing she covets above all else: money. So I am betting that is exactly what brought her back here. She thinks she can make me pay her to leave again. Or she'll make whatever trouble she can, such as dragging me—and Lacy—into a legal fight."

"That is not right. She'd willingly place Lacy in the middle of something like that? Has Lacy ever wanted to see her mother?"

"Never. She never asks about her. And just this afternoon, she told me the same thing again and that she doesn't have any feelings toward her like a child would their mother. Lacy is a smart kid, and I know she's heard stuff from other kids. Their parents talk about it, and there will always be rumors. I told Lacy that if the time

comes that she wants to meet her mother, I will arrange it. But she has always said that she didn't. And that is the way we've left it."

"Well, since I've never been a mother—not to any human child, that is; plenty of the four-footed variety over the years, though—I know there is one thing in common among the species. A child can sense when they are loved and cared about and safe. That is an innate feeling. You can't fool them. Lacy knows the people in her world who have done just that: you, Jaxson, your housekeeper. That is her family unit, and she is safe and loved within it. And she will let people in that she trusts and cares about when she is ready. But all of that is due in large part because you have given her the space and trust she needs to learn and grow. And that is the sum total of my knowledge on that subject."

"You have more knowledge than you give yourself credit for. I have a feeling a lot of what you just said comes from a personal experience. Your parents both left you and your sister at an early age. They didn't do it of their own free will, but you were left to form another family unit just the same. Plus, you have a heart the size of the state itself—something you try hard to keep hidden for whatever your reasons might be. Thanks for showing it a little bit when it comes to Lacy. I hope you'll share more of it as time goes along, maybe to a few of the rest of us, if we're lucky."

The softening in his gaze was visible, as was the return of the easy smile. He opened the door but didn't step away. Instead, he bent his head and bestowed a warm kiss on her forehead. She didn't know exactly how to respond to it, so she just slid into her seat behind the wheel and allowed the door to shut behind her. Beaudry leaned into the open window. His expression was unreadable. Had he issued an invitation? What would happen if she reached over and placed a kiss on his cheek? But that would be too weird, maybe. She chose the safe route and fired the engine to life.

"Thanks again for the meal. Drive home safely."

She fixed a smile on her face, drove around the circular driveway, and headed away from the house. The lone figure of the man in her rearview mirror melted into the shadows behind her. A long sigh escaped her. Sammi Jo hadn't realized she had been holding it in.

The fact that his ex, her old nemesis, was back in town and probably up to no good came as a surprise. But while Beaudry seemed to have things under control and was content that Matt was on the case, she couldn't quite be as confident. Sandy Lou was a sneaky, conniving, cold-hearted witch. Beaudry was right when he said that you chose those you loved and you would protect them to the end. Let Sandy Lou try her games now. This time Sammi Jo Burkitt wasn't her victim—she was the one making the rules and handing out the consequences.

"It's time to take out the trash," she said aloud in the silence of the truck's cab. And she felt a whole lot better.

But then those thoughts were replaced by the memory of Beaudry's unexpected kiss goodnight. Granted, it wasn't exactly what she pictured a goodnight kiss to be—and not from a man like Beaudry Hawkes. But then again, it had come in friendship, and that was the basis for what they needed most. Each of them knew that what they were jumping into would be hard enough without muddying the waters with other feelings.

Holding onto the Aces High was all that mattered. She had entered into a deal with Beaudry Hawkes and they had shook on it. They had a business arrangement that would be mutually beneficial to all parties. And that was just as cold as any arrangement her grandmother ever made.

"Business is business, little girl. You go forgetting that, and you might as well throw in all your cards in your hand. You lose."

"I don't intend to lose anything." Sammi's words were determined, spoken into the

darkness of the night. She would hold the winning hand when all was said and done, or she wasn't a Burkitt!

\*

“Wow, look at the stairs! And the ceiling has things painted on it, like that museum we went to in Dallas.” Lacy's head was on a swivel as she progressed, wide-eyed, ahead of her father and Sammi Jo into the entry hall of the main house. Sammi had invited them over after Sunday church services for a tour of “her house,” as Lacy referred to it. Sammi Jo tried to envision what she had taken for granted most of her life through the eyes of the child seeing it for the first time.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Her house. She had never referred to it in those terms, ever. It was a sobering thought.

Words were often hard to come by when visitors entered the Burkitt domain for the first time. It was huge by even modern standards, let alone through the past decades, as her ancestors added on to it. And the ornate carved woods of the walls and trim work would be almost impossible to duplicate in the present. But then, this was evidence of a kingdom that had been built and added onto and fought for and intended to stand for generations to come. It was the remaining testament to the cattle kings of a bygone era. The Burkitts' history was immense, and this house would be a lasting reminder of their footprints on the land throughout history—or at least, that was how it was intended to be seen. To Sammi Jo, it had been a museum to visit as a child, and she had been mesmerized, as Lacy was in the moment. Then it had become her only home for the last twenty-three years, and her perspective had changed as she became an adult.

“And the paintings on the walls are huge. They must be really heavy too. Are you related to all these people?” Lacy was walking slowly along the marble flooring, her gaze taking in the artwork in silent amazement.

“Yes, these are Burkitts over the last couple hundred years. The earliest painting we have dates back to the early 1800s, even before the battle at the Alamo. It is a small one and not very good, but it is in a glass case in the library. You can see it when we visit in there after lunch.”

“Don't you get scared, living in such a big place by yourself?”

Sammi Jo smiled. “Not really. I've just gotten used to it. And Marcella, our head

housekeeper, and her husband, Joseph, who oversees the care of the grounds, live in an apartment on the first floor, so I'm not really all alone. There are other staff that have cottages just down the hill from here or in town. It does take quite a few people to keep this place in shape. Besides, I have my own small apartment over the main foaling barn these days. We only use this house now for special events or visitors."

"Like us today!" Lacy grinned.

"Exactly like you." Sammi Jo had glanced a time or two at the man who followed along a few steps behind her and Lacy, an unreadable expression on his face as his gaze took in his surroundings. Jaxson, as the head foreman, had met often with her grandfather and then her grandmother. She had no idea what was going through Beaudry's mind, though. Sammi Jo tried to remember if Beaudry had ever visited the main house over the years.

"Is this where we're going to eat? That table has so many chairs. How many are there? Do we pick which one we want to sit in?" Lacy had crossed through the archway with its massive oak carved doors open to reveal the formal dining room, where three huge ornate crystal-and-wood chandeliers hung over the length of the table, carved by Italian artisans more than a century before, brought over to America by ship, that seated a group of forty diners. Each chair's high back had also been carved to match the table. Nothing less would have been expected of a cattle baron going into the twentieth century. A huge fireplace was tall enough for a man to stand upright in it. And the sideboards along the opposite wall were marble inlaid with mirrors hung over their lengths. There were more paintings and photographs, this time of landscapes and noted horseflesh that had made names for the racing side of the operation. Trophies filled a tall case at the opposite end of the room.

"I like to dine in a different room. It's smaller and less formal. We'll go through this door." Sammi Jo held the door open for her guests to go ahead of her.

“Oh, this is pretty. I like this one too. It’s like being in a glass house with lots of plants.”

“My grandfather built on to the house as a wedding present for my grandmother. She loved pretty plants and being outdoors, so he had this solarium-style room added for smaller dinners and other meals for the family. You may choose which chair you’d like to be yours.”

Lacy made almost a full circle around the table, which could easily seat a dozen people around its circular sides. A bright-yellow tablecloth covered it, and the chairs were high-backed, white wrought iron, inlaid in the center, with bright yellow-, green-, and pink-tufted cushions. White stoneware plates, tea glasses, and place settings were already in place.

The aroma of something delicious reached them as they took their chairs.

“You’re very quiet.” Sammi Jo decided to bring the silent man into their realm from wherever he had shut himself away. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Isn’t this a grand house, Daddy?” Lacy added her question.

“It is certainly on the grand scale. Very much like a museum of treasures. And, yes, it’s been a while since breakfast, and the food does smell delicious. I’ve just been enjoying listening to our tour guide talk about her home. I imagine it was quite something indeed to have all of this on a daily basis. I can’t think of anything that would even come close in comparison. In fact, I doubt anything could hope to match it.”

“It’s like a castle, right here in Texas. Are you really a princess in disguise, Miss Sammi Jo?” It was the child’s question, but Beaudry’s full gaze fell on her, a brow raised, echoing that thought.



“A Texas princess in search of Prince Charming.” His smile, coupled with his tone, felt more like a smirk to Sammi Jo. Lacy remained oblivious to the change in the air around the trio.

“That’s what you need, Miss Sammi Jo, a real-life prince. Then you could live here in the castle happy ever after, just like in the book.”

“A Texas princess in distress in search of a prince... don’t know about the happy ending and all. But I’d say the rest will be an interesting story,” Beaudry ended the analogy.

Marcella made her entrance at that moment and saved Sammi Jo from making any response. As she served the lunch of baked chicken, mashed potatoes, and fresh vegetables from their gardens, Sammi couldn’t shake the feeling that his words had dampened the visit, for her at least.

A princess in distress—is that how he saw her? Spoiled and self-indulged and in a bind, begging for his help to save her castle? She certainly didn’t need pity or charity from the man. But she did need him. And that created an even odder feeling. Need and want could become very close twins in some situations. She couldn’t confuse the two.

And if that was how he saw her? A needy, spoiled female having to have her grandmother conjure up a husband for her? Buy her one? Why all of a sudden should it bother her what Beaudry Hawkes thought of her? Business was business.

Except she’d never felt less like a fairy-tale princess in her life. And distress was a most unpleasant feeling. Where would the cure be?

## Chapter Nine

They had risen well before the sunrise so he and Jaxson and the other hands could

finish up loading the two trailers and get them on the road headed to the stock show in Fort Worth. Once they were on their way, Beaudry left Jaxson to load the horses into their horse hauler while he went back to the house, where Lacy, with Seraphina's help, had at least made it down to the table for a bowl of oatmeal that she looked like she might doze off into at any moment.

“Okay, let's get you loaded next, little one.” Beaudry picked her up, and her head went directly to his shoulder, one arm slung around his neck, and a mumbled “Okay” went into his shirtsleeve.

“I packed you and Jaxson and ‘Little Bit’ here some breakfast burritos for the road. She can eat one when she wakes up. Have a safe trip,” Seraphina whispered, passing off the brown sack to Beaudry's free hand and holding the screen door open for his exit.

Beaudry nodded. “Thanks. We'll see you on the flip side.” How often had they repeated the same scene over the years? Such was life on their ranch. It represented stability, and people knew what to expect each day. But things weren't going to be that way for long. The visit yesterday to the “castle” had been unsettling in more ways than one. And Lacy had talked non-stop about it until she finally fell asleep late the night before while they were packing up for the trip.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

He needed to get his mind on other things besides what Sammi Jo had looked like when he had goaded her with the Texas princess moniker. What had gotten into him? He had no idea. At least nothing he wanted to think about at the start of this day. She had been disturbed. Even hurt? That thought kept niggling at him well into the early morning hours, keeping him awake when he should have been getting some sleep for the road. That was why he would gladly let Jaxson take the wheel first when they pulled out. Maybe he could catch a little nap—if those darned blue eyes that accused him of all sorts of things would stay out of his brain. Blasted woman. She caused a disturbance in him, even when she wasn't around.

“Let's move it. Daylight will be wasted already when it does come up.” Jaxson's words were a grumble into his chest as he fastened the final slide of metal on the rear of the trailer. He slid behind the wheel of the heavy-duty truck as Beaudry settled Lacy into the back seat, buckled her in, and bundled a pillow beside her cheek. He took his place up front, and they were soon moving their cargo of six horses down the long road toward the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex.

Jaxson spoke up after they had gotten to the main highway, the sun finally waking up in layers of brilliant hues of purples and pinks, then oranges and yellows, as the sapphire sky lightened into an azure blue. Another Texas day was beginning in a blaze of welcome.

“This is the best part of the day. How many people get to see this from the back of a horse, breathe in clear, clean air to fill your lungs, and listen to the sounds of mourning doves and a hawk here and there as they dive for their breakfast?”

Beaudry opened one eye that he'd closed in hopeful need of sleep. He shot a glance at

his brother. “Since when have you been so chipper so early in the day?”

“I’m always this way. You’re just not around to see it. Sunrise and sunset—best parts of the day, little brother. You should enjoy each one. But I guess you did have a late night and all, dining in the great house with your fiancée. Think you’ll like being the lord of the manor?”

“Sh-hhh.” Beaudry shot a quick look over his shoulder at the sleeping Lacy. “Lower your voice and no talk about that subject. Remember, nothing has been decided yet, and Lacy doesn’t need to know anything about it.”

“Well, it’s all over the county, and there will be talk at the show we’re headed to for the next three days, so I don’t know how you’re going to avoid it, but that’s your business. Are things not going well?”

“Just drop this ‘lord of the manor’ stuff. Even if things go okay and we decide to do this thing, that is far from what I plan to be. You should know that.”

“I see.”

“Now do not start that ‘I see’ business of yours. Or I’ll get out and ride in back with the horses.”

“I see.” A hand shot up, and Jaxson shook his head. “Sorry. Just habit.”

“What is it that you do think you see, Mr. Know-it-all?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“I asked, didn’t I? Or is that just a way to get me riled up, and you don’t really see anything at all?”

“I see a lot. I just don’t spew it out like vomit like others who really don’t know to keep their thoughts to themselves.”

“It’s a bit early to reference such things as vomit in a sentence when we have Seraphina’s burritos to enjoy.”

Jaxson gave a soft chuckle. “Sorry. But it seemed a fitting metaphor to the way you look this morning. You not get any sleep last night? I know Lacy went with you to the big house, so it couldn’t be you had a late night with your possible intended. So what’s the deal?”

“Your mind needs a good cleaning.” Beaudry shifted his weight to a better position in the seat, his tall frame ill at ease. He swept his Stetson off his head, tossed it on the dashboard in front of him, and raked his hand through the thick hair on his head. He had a feeling that the restlessness was not going away anytime soon.

“Have you even kissed her yet? You know, to see if there is any compatibility, at least on that score?”

“Are you serious? I say again that your mind is a terrible thing to see or hear.”

“I see.”

“Stop this truck,” Beaudry ground out.

“So, you have kissed her! If you hadn’t, you would have flat out said so in a heartbeat. I know you, my brother, better than anyone else, remember? Better than you know yourself sometimes too. You have done it. Well? Think you can stick it out three years now?”

“You think you’re so smart. But I didn’t kiss her—not like you’re thinking. It was a

casual peck on the forehead, and that is that. No sweeping her off her feet and carrying her up the grand staircase to one of the twelve bedrooms or whatever. So wipe that smile off your face.”

“The forehead? A beautiful woman, ready to say ‘I do’ to you, and possibly ‘I will’ to one of those dozen beds, and all you manage is a peck. I am seriously considering checking the family bloodline and seeing if we are indeed related. You let down all the Hawkes men. Three years is an awful long time to survive on ‘pecks’—that’s all I’m saying.”

“Do you recall this is all about a business deal? And that I’ve been down that so-called romance road once before and that it was a train wreck and one I don’t plan to ever repeat?”

Jaxson’s grin faded and he nodded. “You had one really bad ride out of the chute on the first go-around. But you know that you pick yourself up, dust off the bad stuff, and get right back onboard. I’m not being rude about it, but I’m saying don’t let someone like your first, who shall remain nameless,”—Jaxson glanced swiftly in the rearview mirror—“blind you to something good that could end up right in front of you. Sammi Jo Burkitt is strong-willed and smart. And she does have a soft spot in her chest the size of Texas, as her granddad often said to me.

“But she also has this armor-coated shell that she changes into in a blink of the eye when she has to step up and do the hard things. I’ve seen her sit in a corner of a stall with her horse, Dancer’s, head resting in her lap, talking to him, and holding him while the vet put him down last year. Then she got up and walked out with nary a tear in her eye. But I came upon her sitting behind the old stone wall when I had to get some tools from the side shed. I don’t think she ever realized I was there. Her whole body was shaking with sobs, but she had buried her face, so little noise could be heard. The point being, she’s someone who will do whatever it takes to hang onto what is her family’s, fight to the end for it. Then if she has to walk away from it, she

will, with her head still up. Inside, I think it will rip her heart to shreds, but she won't let anyone see or pity her for it. I think that was instilled in her by her grandmother. Some people survive by keeping things separate and private. It doesn't mean they don't ever feel them."

There was silence in the cab. Beaudry was struck by his brother's words. Why hadn't he seen the connection before? Jaxson had always been much the same type of person. Tough as nails on the exterior, but don't ever think he didn't have a heart beating the same as anyone else on the inside. He felt things deeply and kept it inside. He had certainly done so when first their mom died and then their father's mind went, leaving them to care for each other and keep him comfortable in a home the last dozen years before he finally did not wake up one morning.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“The old lady made a big mistake, I’m thinking. She seriously underestimated her granddaughter. And I think she might have been better choosing you instead of me for this arrangement. You two are far more alike than she and I are.”

Jaxson shook his head and the grin returned, his gaze remaining on the road ahead of him. “She chose right. I agree about the part she underestimated her granddaughter, but she chose you for a reason. It’s the differences in two people that often make the best cement. Soft and hard, tough, and gentle—get the recipe just right and you got a good strong mixture. And you need a lot of strength in the three years ahead. And that is the long way around to saying, just don’t let a good woman get lost in all the other baggage. Don’t miss out on what might be the last best chance for both you and Lacy.”

Beaudry stayed silent for a bit, his mind going over the sage advice. “That is pretty good like all your words of wisdom from an old bachelor like yourself. I would hope that you might be telling yourself those things too. You’re not getting any younger.”

“That’s kinda cryptic.”

“The other granddaughter, the one that got away, I believe you referred to her a few years back after we had seen her take off for college in that shiny private plane. Where would she be in all of your words of wisdom?”

Jaxson said nothing for a few moments. But Beaudry felt the stiffness filling the body beside him. It was a defense mechanism he was well aware of in his big brother. Especially whenever anything pertaining to Laurel Burkitt was mentioned in his presence. As with Sammi Jo, that invisible wall of armor was zipping itself around



Jaxson's feelings.

“Same song, third verse again. Didn't you see her take off a few weeks back in that same shiny plane? Headed for the glitz and glamour of Hollywood? That's all there is to say on that subject. Now hand over one of those burritos Seraphina packed. I think all this speechifying has made me hungry enough to eat two of them.”

Beaudry was smart enough to know when to drop this particular subject. He had watched his brother get bruised more than a few times over the years as Laurel Burkitt dazzled her way through high school and then college, while Jaxson stood in the shadows behind the crowd of rich male suitors, the glimpse of longing in the dark eyes quickly shuttered if anyone came too close. But Beaudry had seen it. And he hadn't understood it back then.

Now, seated in that front seat in that moment, a realization snapped into place and jarred something deep inside the space in his chest. A space that had been walled off until a determined female had stepped up and rattled the doorknob. Beaudry had a vision of a boot planting itself squarely in the crack in the doorway.

Sammi Jo Burkitt was staking a claim he had no way of ignoring. Darn that woman.

\*

“What are you doing?” Sammi Jo was standing behind her sister, a travel bag slung over one shoulder and the handle of a small rolling case gripped in her other hand. “What's the holdup?” She watched as her sister took in another deep breath, face upturned to the noonday Texas sun, eyes closed, as if savoring some exotic flavor.

Slowly, Laurel shook her head. “Now this is what I miss. I'm just taking it all in for a moment.”

“Well, all I see is that you are going to get a first-class sunburn standing around in the glare of a hot sun bouncing off an asphalt tarmac, no matter what the thermometer might say. You seem to have forgotten what that Texas sun is really all about. And some of us have business to get to, in case you’re wondering why I’m standing here like this behind you.” She jiggled the clothes bag over her shoulder for the appropriate sound effect.

Finally, that earned her a glance, along with a grimace. “That sunshine comes along with something you take for granted, and I have missed fresh, smog-free, sweet-smellin’ air, dear sister. I’m filling my lungs with it so I can take a supply with me when I leave.”

“I’ll mail you a care package each week. Just move it. And if you care so much about it, you know how to fix it. Come back home. Now, move.” And Sammi Jo stepped around her, leading the way down the steps from the jet.

“You have become even more bossy than I remember. Just remember who has seniority and always will between the two of us.”

“I never forget that you are the older one. But thanks for reminding me how to treat my elders.” Sammi Jo smiled as she led the way to the black town car that waited for them, the driver already loading the luggage in the trunk. As usual, her sister had packed a month’s worth of clothing for a two-day trip. Once he had taken Sammi’s items and stowed them, they were soon leaving the airport behind.

“I had hoped that maybe my future brother-in-law might have been the one picking us up. I think I should get reacquainted with him before the wedding.”

There was the needling again. Why had she agreed to hop on the private jet with her sister when she had made a quick stop at the ranch’s landing strip? Sammi Jo could have driven herself or gone with Jaxson and the horses when they had left yesterday.

But then, she wasn't in the mood to share the ride with Beaudry. Things hadn't settled in her mind from the Sunday lunch she had hosted at the main house. It was clear Lacy had enjoyed herself and Sammi Jo had enjoyed it, too, with her. But there seemed to be something going on with Beaudry, and his comments had been even more enigmatic than he normally could be. And that irritated her.

So Laurel's invitation had been opportune—or so she had thought. After the twenty questions during the first part of the flight, they had both turned their thoughts inward, and quiet had reigned for the last half hour. She supposed it was too much to hope for it to last long.

“He and Jaxson have work to do. You know the routine. Transport stock, check them in, have Doc Meyers go over each one to insure nothing transpired during the trip here. Feed, bed them down, and then get things ready for the show ring and sale.”

“Anyone competing this time around?” The question was nonchalant enough, but Sammi Jo knew better.

“Beaudry has entered Texas Moonshine in the cutting horse competition, of course. We have a couple of the hands you probably don't remember, Billy and Carson, team roping and showing some of our stock in the auction.”

There was silence. But not for long. Sammi Jo smiled as she kept her gaze with feigned interest on the passing buildings outside her window.

“And what about your foreman? I suppose he's running the show, as usual?”

“My foreman has a name and you know it. And since I have been roped in to this grand opening at the Western Art Gallery with you, then someone needs to keep an eye on all things ranch related. So, yes, Jaxson Hawkes is alive and well and no signs of a broken heart to be seen at all.”

“Roped into? Sorry, honey, there are duties you might not like but are necessary evils, especially when our family donates an entire wing of paintings and sculptures to one of the foremost galleries in the southwestern part of this country. You have to leave the jeans behind and act like a well-heeled ranch matriarch—goes with the territory now that Grandmother is gone.” There was a pause. “Good for Jaxson. Although I doubt that lone wolf will ever become domesticated enough for any female around Burkitt to snare him.”

“First of all, Grandmother donated this wing. I had nothing to do with it. But then again,”—Sammi Jo corrected herself—“seems that is the prevailing theme since she left us holding the proverbial bag. We are still dancing to her tune in one way or another.” Pausing, she turned to Laurel. “Maybe Jaxson needs an extra special woman to match him, someone who knows what she wants and knows where in Texas to settle down for the long haul with a good man and build a future.”

Laurel met her gaze with one of her own. The difference being her gaze was shielded by the dark lenses of the sunglasses she wore. “Sounds like you’re a cheerleader for at least one of the Hawkes brothers. Maybe you should take that ardent description and apply it to Beaudry and yourself. Those three years might not be that long after all, if you did.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Sammi Jo was saved from a reply as the car pulled up to the front of the hotel's tall marble entrance. Then their attention could be centered on arrival and getting settled into the two-bedroom suite that Laurel had arranged for them. Sammi Jo didn't waste time getting unpacked, her dress for the evening ahead hanging in the closet, and then she had changed into her preferred attire: fresh jeans, a bright electric-blue, long-sleeved, Western-cut shirt with pearlized buttons down the front, and her brown leather Tony Lamas boots that had been shined for the occasion. She secured her long hair back into a ponytail; her only jewelry were the small, gold hoops that her grandfather had given her for her sixteenth birthday and she had worn each day since, unless her grandmother had made her dress up with what she termed "better jewelry," which meant "flaunting our money," in Sammi Jo's way of thinking. All of that was now locked in vaults inside the bank, the fate of which still needed to be decided between herself and Laurel.

And, as her sister had rightly reminded her, being on display for the first time since her grandmother's passing, she needed to represent the fact that a Burkitt or two still remained, and she was the face of the Aces High now. Her stomach gave a pitch. Not a time for that truth to hit home as she gazed at her reflection in the makeup mirror—the first time she had ever faced that bald fact. It was sobering.

You're it, she said to the person looking back at her with a solemn gaze. How did this ever happen? And what the hell do I know about anything? Was this what a panic attack felt like?

She might have expected it later in the evening when she had to dress up and go among society, where she would truly be a duck out of water—but not now. She was headed to the fairgrounds and would be surrounded by what she knew best.

Get a grip. She had chosen to stand her ground and fight for her heritage, no matter what she had to walk through. Head up, gaze straight ahead—a Burkitt until the day you die. And she wasn't about to examine why, in that moment of panic, the image of a tall cowboy named Beaudry appeared, along with a deep, calming determination. She placed the cream-colored Stetson on her head and took a deep breath, ready to face whatever was ahead.

## Chapter Ten

The familiar sights and sounds assailed Sammi Jo as soon as she rounded the corner of the livestock barn where the Aces High animals were assigned stalls. Stepping inside, she gave a moment's pause to allow her eyesight to adjust from bright sunlight to the cavernous, dimmer, indoor fluorescent. Rows of horse stalls were in front of her, shooting off in long branches to the right and left of the main thoroughfare with its mixture of concrete flooring and hay chaff fallen loose from bales being hauled over it and horses being moved to and from performance arenas. There was a continual movement and hum of activity from the snorts of animals, rattle of food buckets, greetings between contestants, and the excitement of visitors, especially the younger set as they caught sight of the horses.

Some females thrived on the smells of exotic perfumes, but Sammi Jo felt the same enjoyment from the mixture of hay, manure, and horseflesh. If she was considered odd, then so be it. It put a smile on her face. She followed the signs on each aisle until she found the third aisle with the simple words Aces High on the sign. All eight stalls held some of the finest ranch horse stock to be found anywhere. Her heart swelled with pride as she moved along, stopping to rub a nose here and there as it was presented to her in greeting. She had watched each of these animals come into the world, studied their training, and cheered them from the arena sidelines.

Turning the corner, she came to a halt. Texas Moonshine stood quietly while Jaxson was finishing his rubdown before the animal would head back to his stall for some R

and R before his next time in the arena. She stepped up to murmur a greeting and run a hand down the column of strong neck. “How goes it, big fella? You are looking mighty fine today.”

“He’s feeling his oats today for sure. A bit hardheaded in the arena, but he settled enough to take a first,” Jaxson responded, shooting a smile over the animal’s back at her. “See you made it. The ride smooth and uneventful?”

“Well, the plane part was smooth and uneventful, but the part where I shared it with my sister? That might not be described so much in those terms.” She laughed and shook her head.

“I see. Nothing changes much, does it?”

“Nope. She is still full of sisterly advice. Although, she did seem grateful to be back in fresh air and fairly open spaces. But who knows? She was and will always be a mystery, that sister of mine.”

Jaxon tossed the coarse brush into a nearby tack box and nodded to one of the ranch hands nearby, handing over the reins to him. “My brother should just be finishing up his first ride. Let’s go see how he did.”

They walked toward the far side of the stall area, where a large group of people were emptying from the stands. “Looks like we missed it. Where is...?” Sammi Jo swiveled her head in the direction that Jaxson’s gaze had landed, a frown creasing his forehead. And she could see why.

Beaudry stood beside his large, gray horse, reins in one hand. His other hand was on the upper arm of the woman he was deep in conversation with. Sammi Jo recognized who he was speaking with at about the same time he lifted his head and caught sight of her and Jaxson. Then the female turned full on toward her, and Sandy Lou Hawkes

sent a slow smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Jaxson ground out beside her. "Just a bad penny, true to form."

Sammi Jo had some vestige of mind left from the shock of seeing her old nemesis—and with Beaudry. "Where's Lacy?"

"Don't worry about her. She's off watching her friend Mariela show sheep in the barn next door. I'm glad she doesn't know anything about that woman being here."

"Good." Sammi Jo had a sudden desire to be anyplace else but where she was at the moment also. But before she could formulate a plan of escape, Beaudry was walking straight toward her, Sandy Lou in his wake. People around them, some of them known to both parties, had stopped to watch whether a cat fight might break out. What were they expecting?

But the most surprised person of them all turned out to be Sammi Jo. Beaudry did not stop, and his gaze had locked on hers. Contrition, embarrassment—none of that shown in the jade gleam that homed in on hers. Only steady determination, and he did not slow his steps until he was inches from her. Then his free hand slid around her waist and drew her into him in one swift movement. Her lips parted, but no words could come out because his lips had taken full possession of hers.

Vaguely, she heard, "Well, I'll be damned" from Jaxson somewhere in the far reaches beside her, and then there was nothing but Beaudry. It was too late to forbid him entrance, and when he slipped his seeking tongue between her parted lips, she felt a searing thrill all the way to the tips of her toes. Her hands went to grab a firm hold on his shirtfront, lest the faintness in her head sent her downward in a quivering heap at his feet. The kiss lasted no more than a minute or so, but she could have sworn it was much longer. He lifted his head and, when she looked into those eyes, the



determination had been replaced with a mixture of shock and something else that grabbed hold of her and made it impossible to speak. Desire? His mouth was still close enough to hers that she felt the warmth of his breath continue to entice her lips and hold her in the spell.

“Hello.”

“Hello.” Neither would win the award for originality after such a mind-numbing kiss. Or did that one word mean something different from just a mere salutation? It was more like two strangers had just met for the first time and just discovered something totally unexpected in the other.

Someone cleared their throat. “In case you’re wondering, she’s gone after shooting daggers at you both. The audience is leaving happy with cell phones already alerting those left behind in town, but there is one very surprised person you might want to be aware of, as she is headed this way.”

They both turned their heads in time to see Lacy on a full-out, full-throttle approach toward them from the other side of the arena, a look of amazement on her beaming face. Jaxson took the reins out of Beaudry’s other hand in time to allow him to swoop up his daughter for what was a full bear hug around his neck.

“You guys are boyfriend and girlfriend now? Right? Please say yes!”

Beaudry looked around them and then down at Sammi Jo before he responded. “Well, it would seem the secret’s out of the bag, Miss Sammi Jo. What do you think about that?”

Was he serious? What was she to think? Her brain was still trying to find words that made sense of anything. But she saw the waiting look on the child’s face and the expectant one on Beaudry’s... rimmed with a hint of challenge now.

That first step had left the safe side of the cliff, and he was waiting for her to join him. “Hell, girl, it’s never the fall that kills you, it’s the landing. So might as well enjoy the ride down.” Words of wisdom from the woman who had landed both Beaudry and her in this fine mess, thanks to a will and her meddling.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“I think we need to find some cotton candy and double-buttered popcorn. Then we’ll ride the tallest roller coaster they have here. That’s what I say.”

Lacy shot a high five toward Sammi Jo. “This is a great day, Daddy. The best! Let’s go!”

\*

For the next couple of hours, the three of them enjoyed the fair, just like any other young family. They ate junk food, lost at the expensive games on the midway, and rode two roller coasters, and then Beaudry bowed out of the rest of the rides. He was fine standing on the ground and watching Lacy and Sammi Jo while he held the second round of cotton candy and lemonades.

He nodded as Lacy rounded the second time on the ride that went backward really fast and then faster still, her laughter matching Sammi Jo’s, who was hanging on for life beside her in the small car.

Beaudry stood in silent amazement. The day had begun quietly enough, and no way could he have imagined where they would end up. Or how they had gotten to this point. But he would forever remember it had begun with a kiss. He would never have believed a kiss could rock a person’s entire world before he had experienced it today. For whatever reason, when he had looked up from his heated discussion with his ex and seen Sammi Jo, she was the port in the storm. The only person who made sense. The kiss had just happened.

And the unexpected part of it all was her response. It might have been a while, but he

recognized a woman who, while caught off guard, was not totally unwelcoming. In another location with a lot less audience, he would have wanted to taste the sweetness of her lips a lot longer, feel the way her body fit against his, and....

He needed to remember where he was and not make a total fool of himself. But there was definitely something he and Sammi Jo needed to have a talk about when they were alone.

For the present, there were a few things to be discussed now that their “romance” was out in the open for all to see. And that included his little girl. She had made no bones about the fact that she wholeheartedly agreed with them being a couple. But there was still that caution sign flashing in the back of his mind. That kiss had just made that final decision a lot more complicated to navigate in less than three weeks.

The ride had ended, and the pair was walking toward him. He needed to keep his mind on the here and now. And definitely no more thoughts of those pink lips wrapping themselves around the drink straw at the moment.

“Dad. Daddy? Are you listening?” Lacy was looking up at him.

“Yes, Lacy. I was just thinking it’s about time that we head back to the barns. I have to get ready for my next event.”

Her crestfallen shoulders spoke volumes.

“Well, I have free time before I have to go back to the hotel and get ready to attend a boring business dinner with the board of the bank and my sister. If you don’t mind, Lacy and I could spend some more time taking in the exhibits and other stuff.”

“Please, Daddy? And can I go over to the fishing pond”—she nodded at the carnival game a few steps away—“and try for a fish?”

“Sure.” He handed over the necessary tickets and watched her. They were far enough removed that his daughter couldn’t overhear their conversation.

“You do realize that if she puts two rings around the bottlenecks, you’ll be carrying home a live goldfish, right?”

“That thought crossed my mind after I agreed. Now, I’m hoping her aim has not improved since the last time she tried this game. But I did want to talk to you without her around.”

Sammi Jo nodded and kept her gaze on the little girl. “I figured you might not want her around the arena in case her mother came back again. Unless, of course, that’s changed, and in that case, I—”

“No, that has not changed. If anything, it just proves this has got to stop once and for all. I guess I’m going to have to talk with Matt and play hardball.”

“So, you hadn’t planned to meet her here? She just showed up?”

His eyes locked with hers. “That was certainly not the case. What it shows is that the state of Texas is not big enough for the both of us. She claims she came along with her stepmother and the woman’s fiancé to watch his cow dog compete this morning in herding. But who knows with her? I’ve never known her to like anything about fairs unless she was looking for some cowboy to have a good time with until his pockets ran dry.”

“I’m sorry that you had such a bad marriage. You deserved a lot better than what you had to go through.”

Her sincerity touched another spot in his chest, and he spoke words that just came in the moment. “I wish I had paid more attention to an irritating next-door neighbor. I

find I was wrong about a lot of things. You are one of them. I'm sorry for my behavior back then."

"Just back then? You seemed to be very irritated the afternoon I showed up uninvited and basically demanded you marry me. Sure you don't want to include any behaviors up to this moment?"

He had to smile. "You wouldn't be flirting with me, would you? Wondering if I will be apologizing for kissing you earlier? Because that would be a definite no. I won't apologize for something that was so surprising and yet very enjoyable. Unless you do expect me to apologize?" He'd just toss the ball back in her court.

She fixed him with a cool look from those topaz-blue eyes that definitely sped up his vitals. "I've never been accused of being a flirt. There wasn't much use for that on the ranch. However, I would expect you to apologize if your intent was just to use me and our situation to make your ex jealous. I don't have time for flirting or game-playing. This is my life and the lives of a lot of others depending on me—and on you, if you decide to take up the offer—to make this all work. I told you that I would do everything in my power to make this easy, to safeguard Lacy as best as I could, and I do expect the same in return from you. I won't be used to make Sandy Lou or any other female jealous or angry. For three years, I will adhere to the vows we have to take, and so will you. Get out now if that seems too hard for you."

"Well, this isn't exactly where I expected this talk to happen right now. But you can count on me upholding my side of the bargain and any vows I make. Although, if you think I won't kiss you again when the time is right for both of us, then think again. But only if you're a willing participant. That I can promise."

Was that a hint of pink staining her cheeks to match those lips? Had the thought of his kissing her again brought about a blush? My, my. This could get very interesting.

It could also be playing with fire, where hearts could become involved.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Well, there is something you can do for me tomorrow evening. I think Lacy would enjoy coming to the party at the art gallery. She loves art, and it will be something different for her to experience. And I hope you might talk Jaxson into coming along as well.”

“I think I’m beginning to see how your mind might be working. I know Lacy would really like to come, but we didn’t come prepared for a fancy evening out.”

“There are a couple of great shops not far from the hotel. I can pick her up in the morning, and we can find something in one of them. And the concierge in your hotel can help out you and Jaxson. You might as well see what you’ll have to be dragged to alongside me a couple times a year. The Burkitts have responsibilities off the ranch also. You’ll have to grin and bear it, I am afraid.”

“I would like to say I have a previous engagement, but I don’t. And there is truth in what you just said. One has to learn to take the good with the bad. As long as it can be mostly good, it might be bearable.”

“I’ll try not to take that too personally. And I do thank you for agreeing to be my plus-three.”

“You can thank me later, but I do need to get moving. Lacy has a roll of tickets stuffed in her pocket, and you might ease up on the junk food. And do me a favor in return.”

“I thought I already had but go on.”



“Don’t let her come home with a goldfish.” He gave her a wink and then stepped over to give his daughter a hug and a reminder about manners. Sammi Jo joined Lacy at the game table, but her gaze had a hard time not following a certain tall figure until he was well out of sight.

Why did she suddenly wish the goldfish bowl would turn into a crystal ball and tell her just how the future would play out with the three of them over the next few years? But then, maybe it was better to not know. One day at a time. She had whispered those words often enough in her lifetime. They would just have to wait and see.

## Chapter Eleven

“This is somuch fun! It’s like Cinderella going to a fancy ball. Just like in the movies.” Lacy hadn’t come down from the clouds since they had arrived at the art gallery. Beaudry doubted his daughter’s eyes could grow any larger in her face as she took in the ladies in their bling-covered evening dresses and men in tuxes, gleaming chandeliers overhead, long linen-skirted tables with silver trays laden with food—mostly items she had never heard of before—and waiters offering champagne at every turn, only it was sparkling ginger ale in Lacy’s case.

But it had been the rooms with walls displaying paintings and drawings and pedestals with bronze statues that had held her attention. Watching from his quiet corner across the room, he felt a tug that was beginning to feel like a permanent fixture inside him as the pair, Sammi Jo, with Lacy close beside her, made their way through the rooms. Sammi Jo always made certain to introduce Lacy to each person she spoke with, always included his daughter, and made her feel even more special.

The transformation from cocoon to butterfly had happened before his eyes. He had been stunned when he had arrived at the hotel to join Sammi Jo and her sister, and Lacy had emerged from a bedroom dressed in a floor-length, dark-blue dress, a sparkly sash around her waist tied in a big bow at the back, and a frothy-looking

material over the full skirt that Lacy modeled for him several times. Her hair had been gathered up in a long braid that circled around the top of her head, and little jeweled butterfly pins held it in place. She showed off her shiny silver slippers to him as well. “Just like a real princess,” he had pronounced, and she had beamed with happiness.

He had looked over at the woman who had orchestrated the transformation and was speechless once again. Samantha Josephine Burkitt was in attendance tonight. He had no idea how to handle that change.

Gone were the usual denim jeans, work shirt, and boots. The long, black gown fitted her figure with a slight flare from the hips downward to the floor. There was a swath of white, silky material that framed the neckline that reached to each shoulder, and then the material fell from the shoulders down her back in a train effect that moved as if she walked on a cloud through the rooms. Her hair was almost the same as Lacy’s, in an intricate braiding. He knew that the drop earrings and the single teardrop necklace were the real deal, as a jeweler was just departing the suite when he had arrived. Laurel had chosen rubies for herself and he had been informed diamonds were Lacy’s choice for Sammi Jo. The difference in their lives—and the insanity of a rich old lady’s will. His fingers tightened around the stem of his glass.

“You look like you ate something that didn’t agree with you,” came the comment from Laurel as she appeared at his side, her eyes showing concern. “All okay with you?”

“Don’t mind me. I guess I’m still feeling the jolt from the realization that my daughter is fast leaving the little girl in her behind.”

They both watched as Lacy shook hands with an elderly gentleman across the room, who turned out to be a congressman and was definitely being charmed by his little girl.

“Poor dad. I hate to tell you, but I’m pretty sure it will only get worse for you. Especially when those young boys start lining up at your gate.”

“A gate that will be shut and locked with me standing shotgun until she’s thirty.”

Laurel laughed and shook her head. “You have so much to learn and endure. But Lacy is a very bright young lady, and she loves you and respects you. You’ll gain a few gray hairs or maybe lose it all, but it will be worth it.” She took a sip from her champagne glass and let a moment of silence pass. “So what’s the rest of the worry you haven’t shared? This isn’t the first time this evening I’ve seen you withdraw and that look shield something much deeper from others. Does my sister have need to worry about you not going along with Grandmother’s plan?”

“Is there ever a moment that isn’t overshadowed by that ridiculous will?”

“Afraid not. It’s a heck of a huge shadow. What bothers you the most about it? I can promise you that my sister does have manners, can cook, doesn’t spit, bathes daily. Is it her?”

“I appreciate the levity. But I do have to consider Lacy, both now and over the next three years, and what might happen at the end of the terms. I also know that marriage is tough, even in the most normal circumstances. And there is nothing normal about any of this. The differences in our lives are glaring to anyone. I’m too old a dog to learn new tricks such as which fork to use on the fancy table setting, how to tie a bow tie, how to satisfy a woman who can go out and buy anything her heart desires anytime she wants. There are four vehicles in her garage right now and a Gulf Stream jet in the other garage. If she wants to fly to Italy for a genuine plate of spaghetti, she could. There are a couple of eligible billionaires here tonight that I have watched try to get her to meet for drinks later. Exactly how do I measure up to all of that? Any ideas?”

“Do you want to measure up?” Laurel was nothing if not blunt. “Do you know anything about my sister at all? If you truly did, you would know that she used to check a cheat sheet on table place settings that she had our cook make for her. She would study it before each dinner, like cramming for a major exam, so as not to displease Grandmother. You can buy bow ties that are clip on. My sister hates spaghetti. And billionaires have tried their best before and they always drink alone.

“If you care for her, if you end up falling for her, you’ll know what she truly needs, and it doesn’t involve money. It involves something a lot tougher to give, and that is your whole heart because she deserves to have that. Someone she doesn’t have to continually strive to please and impress. You’ll need to care enough to know when she might need her hand held, even though she will never ask for it. She loves sitting in a field of bluebonnets more than getting dozens of red roses from the florist. She’s not as thick-skinned as she likes to think. But she won’t let anyone know when she’s hurting. There are a lot of things you’ll want to figure out about her if you think you are worthy of the true Sammi Jo. But then isn’t that half the adventure of a real marriage? It first begins with love. If you can’t give her that, then be prepared to move on in thirty-six months.” She gave him a wink and left him to sort through all she had said.

\*

“Thankfully, this willsoon be over. We will say a final thank-you to all who came, and then we can go back to the hotel and the gowns and jewels go away for what I hope will be another year or so. I just want to get out of these shoes as the first thing.” Sammi Jo had found him just outside the tall glass doors on the edge of the patio. He could still see most of the room, but he could also look up and see a few stars and feel the breeze on his face.

“I saw you and my sister having a conversation earlier. Was it intense or just party chat?”

“A gentleman never discloses what a lady tells him. And to put it plainer than that, I plead the Fifth.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

She grinned. “I see. No going down that slippery slope of self-incrimination. Good choice.”

“Thank you. I will say it again. What you did with Lacy these two days—you have taken my place at the top of her most favorite list, I do believe. Might have even supplanted Beast too.”

She shook her head with a rueful smile. “I doubt that. And fathers have a place that is never given to anyone else all their daughters’ lives. That is a known fact. So don’t worry. You are irreplaceable.”

“Sit a spell.” He made space for her on the bench and then patted his knee. “Raise your foot up here.”

“What? Are you crazy?”

“No one is paying attention, and it’s dark enough anyway that they won’t see much. Give me your foot.”

Sammi Jo did so, a totally puzzled look on her face.

Beaudry pushed the material of her gown above her ankle and then undid the small buckle. Off came the offending stiletto to be placed on the bench beside him. Then with firm hands, he began to massage her ankle and foot. It was evident to him that it was a welcome sensation that both eased the discomfort and brought a totally new feeling of pleasure, along with the nimble fingers on her flesh, if her soft smile and lowered lashes were any indication. For a moment, her eyelids drifted closed, taking

in the soothing movements. Then they opened as she watched the man's head bent in his intent to give her comfort.

"I have never had anyone give me a foot massage before. I would have if I had known how great it feels. You have magic in those hands. You might have found a new profession if you ever want one."

The smile he shot her, along with a green gleam of warmth, only added to the pleasure level and kept her gaze trained on his.

"Well, you are my first client. But I think my services along these lines will remain very exclusive. Of course, feel free to tip if you are so inclined."

Sammi Jo took that as more of a dare than anything. And she never backed down from a dare. Especially where this jade-eyed cowboy in the sexy black tux was concerned. He had taken her breath away the moment he walked into the suite earlier that evening, complete with the dressy black Stetson on his head and black boots. He had turned the heads of every woman in the gallery on their arrival. And now he was giving her a very exclusive foot massage. A tip? Most definitely. And she leaned over and found those lips ready to welcome hers.

The heat that erupted inside her shot from head to the foot that was firmly held in his powerful fingers, and then zinged through all her other body parts. The man could kiss. He could be an Olympic champion at it. And she was a very grateful girl. Sammi Jo laid her hands along the soft, lightly stubbled skin along both cheeks, holding him captive, as her mouth, with a most insistent tongue, knocked on the door that slowly opened to admit her into another slice of Heaven and added fireworks down in the deepest part of her core.

A warmth began an ascent, unimpeded by the long skirt, a burn that traveled from her foot, around the ankle, ever so slowly along the calf, a gentle kneading of muscle

until the warm flesh hesitated, then softly circled one long finger over the skin of her inner thigh. She answered with a moan in the back of her throat and subtly shifted her hips to push her body closer to his exploration.

A giggle and then a deeper murmur of laughter seeped into her consciousness, just as his fingers stilled and withdrew the warmth of his hands, along with his lips. Reality crashed back into Sammi Jo's realm. She dropped her hands from his face as his head straightened on his shoulders. But he kept possession of her foot.

A couple had come out on the patio through one of the doors at the end and interrupted Sammi Jo and Beaudry and whatever was very close to happening on that bench in the semi-darkness. Then retreated back inside. Sammi Jo felt the heat pool in her cheeks and hoped Beaudry couldn't see. What she had done was not in her character. What must he think?

"That... I don't act that way... I have no idea... maybe too much champagne or..." That long finger that had worked such magic only a few moments before was placed gently on her lips, silencing her words. Beaudry slowly shook his head, the fire banking in those gorgeous eyes but not the warmth that still shone from them.

"Sh, it wasn't the champagne. You and I have discovered that there is definitely some heat to be found if we allow our feelings to take charge. But we also know that it can cloud the very important decisions we need to deal with first with clear heads. Hearts and other parts of our bodies can't have a say in it. And I am trying my best to remember that advice each moment I spend in your company. I hope you'll help me out with that as well."

"Help you?"

"Try not to be so damn irresistible. Don't wear makeup, comb your hair, or put on that sweet-smelling scent you wear a lot. Don't bathe, maybe. And all that sounded



really lame. So add ‘don’t get me tongue-tied and muddle-brained’ to the list. Think you can do that?”

“Sure,” she said, removing her foot, taking her shoe into her hand, and swiftly putting it back in its place. Then she stood, smoothing her skirts. Looking down at the cowboy who had clearly been thrown off by her sudden move and change in direction, she nodded. “I will simply go back to considering you to be a pain in the butt and something akin to a pesky fire ant to eradicate off Burkitt land as soon as possible. That sound about right?” She turned on her heel, trying not to laugh at the sheer look of shock on his good-looking face. Sammi Jo could do Sammi Jo really good if she put her mind into it.

Careful what you ask for, cowboy.

\*

“You called him that? A fire ant? Is that the best analogy you could think of? And he took it?” Tallie refilled the coffee in Sammi Jo’s mug and plated another cinnamon roll, setting it in front of her before she took a seat across from her. “I realize that you spend the bulk of your time with bovine and horseflesh, so you might need to work on how you speak to a potential husband. Calling a guy who just took you to the edge of total passion as less than a fire ant is not the best of compliments in that moment.”

“I expected a bit more empathetic understanding from my best friend. This is where you should be supporting my judgment and making me feel better and not worse.” Sammi Jo attacked the roll with her fork, cutting off a bite and popping the gooey piece into her mouth.

“It’s because I tell it like it is when you screw up that makes us best friends, remember? I live vicariously through your one and only major romance prospect, and you are about to screw that up big time. And then what do I do?”

“Gee, I don’t know, maybe take the blinders off, and see that tall, uniformed hunk of male that needs you to pay attention to his covert glances every time he comes in here for tea or lemonade or coffee and all those lunches and afternoon pie breaks. Do you think he doesn’t kill himself every day of the week in the local gym just so he can shed those extra pounds only to pack on more? Everyone sees it but you. So stop berating me for my lack of love life and get your own with a sexy lawman.”

Tallie shook her head. “Don’t change the subject. Just wise up before you mess up something really good and lose your ranch in the bargain. But Beaudry is right. The time is coming for a decision. Sounds like neither of you are sure of what the answer will be, or you are both just too scared to be the first to speak up. I hope you’re preparing for might happen if the answer is no.”

That was the sobering thought underneath the sleepless nights and her mind wandering during the day when it needed to focus on things like running a ranch. Thank Heavens she had Jaxson and old Tom and many others who were her backups and kept her from totally screwing things up during this crazy time.

But Tallie was right. What if things didn’t go as positively as she tried to think? Besides the money, why would Beaudry want to take the chance of having his daughter’s heart broken into pieces if—when—they did call it quits after the three years? Was his hesitancy because he was trying to find a way to soften the blow when he backed out?

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

What if they fell in love and everything just continued perfectly fine? Too much of a fairy-tale ending? Her life wasn't the typical fairy tale.

The what-ifs were too many. And love was out—he had made it clear and she had agreed. Only use the brain, no feelings allowed.

She had started this mess. And others were trying their best to make it work out. And she was grateful for that. But Tallie was right: Sammi Jo needed to deal in reality and have a plan for the day the wrong answer came along. When did she never have a Plan B? Her grandfather had taught her that, not her grandmother. It was probably the best lesson of all. She stood and managed a smile.

“Now that I feel so much better, I need to get back to work. Thanks for being here.” They shared a heartfelt hug. It was only as she was leaving that she saw Jaxson sitting with a couple of other ranchers, having an early lunch. They nodded across the room, and she continued on her way. No Hawkes could help her out of this mess.

### Chapter Twelve

“The local newspaper's Let's Gossip columnist has dubbed you the no-show Hawkes brother, and I'm the 'less desirable than a fire ant' brother. We've certainly done ourselves proud.”

Beaudry sat on his horse, hat pushed back off his forehead, and one leg hooked over the pommel of his saddle as he idly watched a group of cattle added to the pens below their vantage point late in the afternoon. It was one of those 'hotter than a cast-iron skillet on full burn' sort of Texas late-September days.

Jaxson's expression often boded nothing good for anyone trying to poke the bear into anything resembling a better mood. But Beaudry never was one to not take an opportunity to needle his older brother, particularly when they both seemed to be in the same boat that was taking on water.

Jaxson slowly turned his head. "This is a good time to point out the fact that it is you who has got us into this mess. Your boot-dragging in making a decision about this marriage business has landed us both in the manure pile in ways neither of us wants."

"And your point would be?"

"Fix it. Either marry the woman and suck it up for thirty-six months or don't. We'll do just fine as we always have done without an extra three million sitting in the bank. Lacy won't go to Harvard or some big hoorah school like that, but she'll go to Texas Tech and learn just as much, if not more, about what she needs to know. If you don't know by now that Sammi Jo will continue to be there for your daughter even if you bow out, then you are just as dumb as I always gave you credit for. And you won't always be known as lesser than a bug—except by me."

"Interesting perspective. And how does that take care of your claim to fame as a no-show?"

"I've already dealt with that for myself. I was only reminded of it when you had to go all high and mighty and bring Laurel Burkitt back into the picture, no pun intended. I've put that woman in the past, where you need to either do the same with Sammi Jo or marry her. Just get on with it before you make the problem worse."

"The problem? Which one would that be?"

"The one where you've already fallen for the woman. Only you are too stubborn to

own up to that too. Either way, let's get those cows moving before the price of beef goes in the dumpster too." He didn't wait for Beaudry to follow. Which was just as well.

Settling his hat back down over his brow, he tapped his mount's sides into action. But it wasn't as easy to get thoughts of Sammi Jo and their situation from his brain. It kept pace with everything he did, hounding his sanity. The question screaming the loudest wasn't that his brother was right—at least not when it came to the fact that he needed to make his decision and get it over for everyone's sake.

But falling for Sammi Jo—that was the grenade his brother had tossed out and then left to do its damage in his wake.

It should have been easy to brush aside. It should have been. But it was like ripping off the proverbial Band-Aid from a scratch. While it was covered and safe from harm, you tended to forget about it. Until the time came to face it again in the light of day and take it off. And the fact hurt no less. He had done the one thing he had warned others about: don't involve feelings, only your brain. The joke was on him. The man who said he was done with letting one woman rule both his head and heart. It wasn't worth it.

But he hadn't taken the blindfold off and really looked at the woman before. He had let her last name taint his whole view of her—and, to a lesser extent, her family. Money changed people, some for the better and some for the worse. And he might even have to think a little kinder toward the old lady. If she hadn't started the nightmare train they were on in motion, he might never have known Sammi Jo for the woman she really was.

And trying to describe her should have been his first clue that he was on his way to being a goner.

He could say no to his part of it all. But then Sammi Jo would have to give up her dream, her heart's reason for beating each day. Could he live with himself after that? But there was also Lacy involved. True, Jaxson was probably correct—from the interaction and concern Sammi Jo had shown so far with Lacy, Beaudry couldn't see her not staying a big part of the girl's life, no matter what happened after the three years. Building on the attraction that was already definitely there, could it be parlayed into something lasting, as in the forever that some people managed to find with that one person? He knew he was still hesitant in putting his faith in forever, given his first marriage nightmare.

But Sammi Jo was as different from his ex as day was to night. And he knew that to be true in his heart. A heart that had managed to blindside his brain, after all. One way or another, he had to get his head out of his backside and take care of the situation once and for all. It was time. Forget the words. It was time for action. He and Sammi Jo needed to lay their cards on the table.

\*

Sammi Jo was getting no place fast. She had read and reread the same ledger reports four times and still had no clue what she should take away from it. Her mind was not on the pages on her computer screen, nor inside the office in the barn. It was bouncing back and forth from the kiss and the feelings that had been laid bare in that moment to the realization that she was asking so much from so many other people. It might have been her grandmother's last wish, but it was she, Sammi Jo, who was actually having to move the lives around this big chessboard in her brain. And her brain was refusing to function in the way she needed.

Switching off the computer screen, she grabbed her purse and keys.

She would go pick up the box of new tiles she needed to replace some older chipped ones in one of the bathrooms in the main house. Then she would stop by the vet and

get a refill on the new meds for one of the mares who had tussled with a nasty piece of broken fencing wire and developed an infection that still needed another couple of days to heal. These were items she could take off the plates of the ranch hands who had bigger items to contend with. People truly did not realize that a ranch the size of Aces High had to function like a business with many different components, often working twenty-four hours a day. No matter the weather, no matter whether people or the animals were having bad days, the Goliath known as Aces High continued, and they'd all better stay in front of it and anticipate. And then Mother Nature would toss in a curve ball or two to spice things up. But it was her life and she might lose it all: the land, the people she cared about, and the heritage that was hers to protect. And that brought her mood even more down than before.

Luckily, she found a parking spot between the mercantile and the vet. She ran to the vet's office first. That took not even five minutes. With meds in hand, she opened the door and stepped right in front of a rattlesnake. Well, not an actual reptile one, although that might have been preferable in the long run. It was the human variety named Sandy. And the woman had trouble on her mind.

"Well, lookee here. If it isn't my ex's little pot of gold. Nice move getting chummy with my kid and using her to make sure Beaudry is a done deal. I saw that photo of you all in those fancy duds and you flashing your money around. That blinded Beaudry for a bit. But I don't think he'll put up with all that stuff for too long. My money would be on the schoolteacher. She's more his speed, and she knows how to take care of a kid."

Sammi Jo was in no mood for this woman and her riddles. Her rope was already a short one and getting shorter by the minute. "You have me confused with your conniving ways. And there is certainly no competition between me and anyone else. You are yesterday's old news."

"But she isn't, is she? I don't think so." Sandy nodded her head to a place over

Sammi Jo's left shoulder. In a quick reaction, Sammi Jo half turned and her gaze caught sight of Beaudry and Lacy across the street, a little ways down in front of the pizza place. They were in animated conversation with none other than Miss Crawford, Lacy's teacher. There were a lot of smiles and laughing going on by all three. Just a simple little tableau on a sunny afternoon. Then Beaudry reached for the door handle and Lacy headed inside the restaurant, followed by the teacher. Beaudry bent his head toward her to catch something she was saying, and it looked almost intimate. If someone didn't know better, it would certainly look like the two of them were enjoying each other's company. A sharp pain jabbed into Sammi Jo's middle. Could the day go any more wrong? Of course, it just did. But Sandy Lou was not going to have the pleasure of gloating. Sammi Jo gave a shrug and looked back at the woman who was waiting to enjoy the meltdown that wasn't coming.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“They make a cute family. Sorry it didn’t happen that way for you, but you did have your shot and you blew it. You really should move on with your life. Seems like as her mother, you’d want Lacy to have a real family life with two parents who truly want her. I feel sorry that you made the wrong choice.”

Sammi Jo turned on her heel, but then she stopped. Something took over her brain. Whether it was insanity or finally having had enough of everything, she turned back to the woman who was still trying to wrap her mind around Sammi Jo’s previous comeback. Well, she was in for another surprise.

“And in the interest of saving time, I’ll let you in on a couple of things you should know. First, I was on my way to share a pizza dinner with Beaudry and Lacy and her teacher. Call it something like a parent-teacher conference. Oh, sorry about that—guess you wouldn’t know anything about something like that, would you? And one more very important thing you also don’t know but should be aware of... the Burkitts have an entire law firm working twenty-four hours a day. All they do is whatever I want them to do. And with that pot of gold you like to refer to so much in my back pocket, well, I always get things my way, one way or another. So, I would get any thoughts of causing Beaudry any trouble with custody or upsetting Lacy’s childhood with your greed and conniving ways out of what little brain you have. And expecting me to share any of my ‘gold’ with the likes of you would definitely be a huge mistake on your part. I can make your life miserable. And that would be for the rest of your life. So, it was good having this little chat between us girls. You be careful now as you head your car out of town—and keep it headed that way for a very long time. Bye now.”

This time, when she turned, she had a view of Sandy Lou’s pale face and her mouth

dropping wide open. And that was enough impetus to carry her across the street and straight into The Pizza Pie Pantry before she had a chance to chicken out.

“It’s Miss Sammi Jo, Daddy! Hi! Can you eat pizza with us?” The child was more than pleased to see her. Her gaze swept over to Beaudry, who was clearly surprised by her appearance. The teacher was nowhere in sight at the moment.

“Well, I just stopped to order a pizza to go. I wouldn’t want to intrude in your dinner plans.” Her earlier bravado was quickly dwindling; she needed to find a graceful and fast exit strategy.

Beaudry smiled. “Actually, you could keep me company. I was going to take a pizza home, too, instead of staying and eating alone here.”

“Alone? I thought you had plans with... others.”

“Miss Crawford and her student teacher are treating Lacy and her class to pizzas tonight in the party room to celebrate their latest test scores. I was going to drop her off here and come back later. But if you’ll take pity on me, we can share a pizza and each other’s company instead.”

So he wasn’t dining with Miss Crawford. Sammi Jo smiled inside. She had taken the problem by the horns instead of slipping away like some weak female to nurse her wounded ego and bruised heart. Sandy Lou’s penchant for poisoning things hadn’t worked this time. And Sammi Jo had yet another reason to trust in Beaudry.

“That does indeed sound better than dining alone this evening. Only I have to warn you, I expect at least half of that pizza to have pineapple on it. Are you man enough to accept that?” She tossed that out, along with a grin and a wink at Lacy.

“It is indeed a hard task for a tough cowboy like me, but I think I’m not too old to

learn new things. You run along, Lacy, and help your teachers get ready. Us old folks out here will be just fine.”

A few minutes later, they were both seated in one of the red leather booths, their pizza and drink order turned in. The lighting was dimmer in the restaurant seating area, and the booth backs were high and made for more intimate settings for couples on dinner dates. Although it was still a bit early for the evening diners, there were two or three booths taken. All the usual noise and loud games and music were kept in the large entertainment party room at the back of the building.

“I’m glad you happened to walk in the door. A very nice surprise indeed.”

“I’m afraid I have a confession tonight. Although once I make it, you might not want to share that pizza with me. You did say we should put things out on the table between us in all of this. So I guess I get to do just that.” She needed to come clean. It was time.

\*

Beaudry settled into the booth, his long legs stretched a bit, and he swept the hat off his head and laid it on the edge of the table. Whatever Sammi Jo was about to impart, it sounded serious. And once she had said her piece, he might need to share some things he had been thinking about too.

“Ladies first. I’m listening.”

“I really didn’t come into town for pizza. I was across the street at the vet and then I was headed to the tile store. But I ran into Sandy Lou—or she ran into me, which was probably her plan all along.” Sammi Jo continued to give him the details, if not the whys, then at least the conversation.

“So either the cat got your tongue or you are not pleased in some way.” It was obvious Sammi Jo was reconsidering whether she should have broached the subject at all. To his credit, Beaudry took his time with a reply.

“Sandy Lou approached you to what—spew her venom around some more? She hoped to cause an issue between us by her insinuations about me and Miss Crawford? To what end?”

“Because that’s what she does. She places burrs under saddles, not caring about harm to the animal or the rider, out of pure spite. She wanted to stick a barb in me about you and Lacy’s teacher, hoping to hurt me or shake my confidence or whatever. Who knows why she does the things she does?”

“I became aware of her mean streak a little late in many cases. I apologize for that. But what did she hope to gain by driving a wedge between you and me? If, as you accused her, she hoped for some monetary gain in all of this via my association with you, then she overplayed her hand. She punched your buttons easily enough but got a totally different response than one she probably expected.”

“Why do I think you really aren’t very pleased by what I did?” She sat back as the waitress delivered their drinks and then left them alone again.

“Maybe because I’m not. If she didn’t have it in mind to go after Lacy for monetary gain from you, well, she certainly has the idea in her head now. Matt said to leave her alone and let him handle it, and that is what I have pushed myself to do. Then along you come and find your avenging angel wings or sword or whatever and speak before considering that maybe it isn’t your place to do that.”

The moment the words came out, he knew he had made a huge mistake. He saw the flash of pain that shut down the blue gaze across from him. He felt the force of it. “Look...” He lowered his voice and tried to find the way to soften the blow he had

dealt. But it was like the horse that left the barn ahead of the fire. “I know that you meant well. You thought you could help Lacy. But you haven’t really had experience with...”

Sammi Jo stood, the napkin going onto the tabletop. “You’re right. I haven’t had the experience with children, certainly not to match someone like Miss Crawford. I end up making a mess of things when I try to help. How could anyone think this would ever work between you and me? I am the last person you and Lacy need in your lives. Thanks for pointing that out for me so clearly tonight. Enjoy the whole pizza.”

“Daddy, where’s Miss Sammi Jo going? The waitress and I brought your pizza on the tray. I wanted her to see how I could be a good server.” Lacy was in time to see Sammy Jo’s back as the door closed behind her. Add the disappointment in his daughter’s eyes to the hurt he had caused in Sammi Jo’s and he was having a red-banner evening.

“She had to go back to the ranch because there was an emergency. She was sorry she had to leave. But I think you’re doing a great job. Get a little older and you can get a job here and support your dad in his old age.” He tried to crack a joke and get a smile out of her. All it earned him was one of those looks that was meant to let him know what a really lame dad joke he had just made. He had failed with both females in his life in the space of minutes. The problem was, he had a sinking feeling that he might not be given another chance with Sammi Jo.

He should have told her up front that he felt proud she would stand up for herself and for him and Lacy as she had done. He should have asked her what it was that really possessed her to do it. It wasn’t just her concern for Lacy—his gut told him there was more. He let her leave, feeling like a failure, and that was far from the truth. It was time for the truth, all of it. He just had to figure out how to get her to stand still and listen to what he really wanted to say.

\*

“You aren’t serious. This is the last thing I ever expected to hear from you. You fought for this chance. You wouldn’t just...quit,” Laurel spat out the word as if it had a horrid taste. “It’s almost four in the morning here. Only bad news comes after midnight, and this is unbelievably bad news. What brought all of this about?” Laurel was definitely wide awake at this point.

“I took those blinders off finally, the ones you always accused me of wearing so often over the years. You should be pleased that I finally took some advice from you.” Sammi Jo was seated on the floor of her bedroom, the only light in the room coming from the small desk lamp in the far corner. She preferred sitting in the shadows. It fit her frame of mind. After waking up to the truth earlier in town, she had come home to work a lot of lists and rows of figures on many pieces of paper, running over different scenarios through her brain over the last several hours. Now, in the dark quiet of the early morning hours, she knew she had to reach out to her sister. Laurel was the only one there was really, and that only made the whole situation feel worse.

“Forget about my sayings and telling me I’m right. Lay it out straight for me. You begged for this chance. You dove in with both feet, ready to do whatever it took to keep the Aces High intact. What about the ranch hands and their families? You were so concerned for them if strangers came in and tore everything up. You were going to be the protector of the family’s history. I need to understand this about-face before you go and do something that can’t be stopped when you snap out of whatever this is that has you so upset. I can be on the plane in the morning and—”

“No, that isn’t what I need. I just need to say this out loud and let you know what I

have decided. I worked the numbers for hours, and I have a plan to give a good severance package to each of the families. They can retire, or the younger ones will have a good start toward their own ranches or colleges or whatever to make things easier for them. It will all come out of my share of the selling price and mine alone. And I'm going to visit with the attorneys and see what it takes to at least preserve the house and maybe a barn or two as some sort of state historical site. Maybe not all of the Burkitts and their place in early Texas history will be discarded. We all have to face facts. And when it comes down to it, people who are still alive are the ones who matter the most. Grandmother was wrong to try to manipulate people even after she died. I can put an end to that, and I will."

"And what does Beaudry Hawkes have to say about all of this change of heart?"

Sammi Jo allowed a moment of silence to rest on the phone connection. Mainly, she needed to tamp down the sudden surge of emotion his name evoked. The more she had gotten to know the real man, the more she had wanted to know. And the more she cared, the more she had allowed her heart to open and let a tall, green-eyed cowboy saunter in and stake a place. Easy as that. And just as painful. Because he had no place there—she had made certain of that. Someday the pain would fade... when she was old and gray maybe.

No more tears.

"Lacy needs stability. It was wrong of us all to think that we could do this and then shake hands, give over the check, and walk away. Lacy will be the one hurt. What made me think I knew how to be a mother figure? I would just make a mess of it. And I am not going to do that. She needs a home and a mother—two parents in a solid home. And I can clear the way for that. It's just land. It'll still be here in one form or another when we are all gone."

"It's just land." She could almost feel Laurel shaking her head. "Now I know that

something has really happened. I don't know what. But I will find out."

"Laurel, you said this was my decision. As such, I have the right to rescind it and go another direction. No papers have been signed. No money has been exchanged. And certainly no wedding rings. I just needed you to know what I am doing. And I need you to support me in this. Aren't you the one who told me that I wasn't thinking straight in what a couple hundred million dollars could do for me? I'll find my own ranch someplace and start my own heritage. Not too many people have that going for them. It's not like I will be destitute or on the street. It's time we all got some perspective. Just trust me, okay?"

"I am totally confused. I will admit that. Maybe I'll understand better in the morning, but I doubt it. You want my support, then I will give it. But I still can't help feeling that you really need to step back, wait a couple days, and think about it some more."

"I did my thinking. The sun is about to come up here, and I haven't had any sleep yet. Remember that Granddad always said to rise before the sun and beat the devil to his work? Get some beauty sleep—you need it. Later, big sister."

Sammi Jo didn't stay on the phone long enough to hear any comeback Laurel might have made. She had tried to end on a teasing, lighthearted note. But her heart felt far from being light. The world she knew was about to change forever. How did one go about dismantling more than two centuries of history? She'd own her share of the blame for it, but her brain laid a good deal of credit for it on the deceased matriarch of the Burkitts.

Had it been her intent all along for the land and their beginnings, won in a hand of poker with the Hawkes all those many moons ago, to finally end in such a way? Sammi Jo wished she could have one last conversation with the woman. Whatever had been in her mind? But it was all about to be too late to think about those things. She moved to stretch out for a moment or two on her bed, her eyes closing as she



fought to silence her brain. Just a little quiet... perhaps a nice dream? One more dream that all would be right again with the new day.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Thank you for coming out here, Matt. I know you have busy days, but I thought we could have a quieter chat here, along with some lunch.” Sammi Jo led the way into the dining room as Matt Matteo followed along, his interest evident in the great house as they passed along the halls and then stepped into the glass-walled informal dining room.

“How could I resist lunch with a lovely lady and a chance to see the inside of the Burkitt domain?” He took the chair Sammi Jo indicated opposite her own. His gray Stetson settled into the empty chair beside him.

“It has been a while since you’ve actually been out here, hasn’t it? I just realized that. Time does indeed get away from us.”

“The last time I was inside this house, at least in the ballroom, was the graduation party for you and Laurel and the sendoff for your cousins, Kenzie and MacKenna. It has indeed been twelve, thirteen years?” He took a sip of his iced tea. His dark eyes were unreadable.

“I remember all of us growing up here. We’d meet down at the river swimming hole Granddad had made for us, or we’d swim in the pool Grandmother had built when we got to high school. Those were good times. Too bad we all sort of drifted away after that party.”

“Well, you four ladies were off to college, and I headed to the military. Much different paths took us away from here.”

“Three of us girls did return to Burkitt. I’m sorry that MacKenna didn’t. I miss her. She always made us laugh so much.” Sammi Jo saw the slight change in his smile. It wasn’t as bright. Maybe a little hint of melancholy? Or was it more?

“Do you and our cousin keep in touch? You know, I always hoped you’d be joining our family one day. I thought you two were the perfect childhood sweethearts who would marry and have four or five kids, and we’d celebrate your fiftieth anniversary right here in that ballroom one day. Funny, the thoughts we have in our heads as we grow up.”

“Yes, funny they can be. Unfortunately, I’ve never heard a word from her since she left Burkitt behind. And, in reality, very few school crushes ever make it past graduation. But I’m thinking you didn’t invite me out here to taste this delicious steak in front of me and reminisce about our childhoods. What’s on your mind, Miss Sammi?”

She could see that Matt wasn’t one to take a stroll down a memory lane that involved her cousin or their past. It was time for the business at hand.

“There are two things. The first I am hoping is relatively easy. Once the dust settles from the present legal issue between the Burkitts and Hawkes, please consider representing me as legal counsel in business matters, and personal when needed. I would like to retain you if that is the correct terminology.”

He sat his fork on the edge of his plate and gave her his full attention.

“My first reaction to that would be, why? The Burkitts have always had the best legal counsel team this side of the Mississippi. The firm in Fort Worth is impeccable. Why would you want to change?”

“I will be making some changes—personal ones. I would like to have someone that I

know personally and I trust. Don't get me wrong. Grandmother's attorneys are the best, but they are—were—her choice. I plan on making quite a few changes, and I would like to offer you that opportunity, if you would be interested.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“To handle the legalities for the Aces High?”

“Not exactly. It would be my business and any future ventures I might undertake. I just want to get you to agree to take me—just me—on as a client.”

She watched as he filtered the information. Matthew Matteo had always had the analytical mind to be the excellent lawyer he had become. She knew he had more questions but would take a slower approach. Sammi Jo didn't want him to know too much, as things still had to be settled with Beaudry and the agreement on the table between them had to be canceled, but they would get into that soon enough.

“I see—at least what you want me to see right now. But my gut is telling me there is more to come. So, one thing you need to realize—I don't beat around the bush with my clients and I expect the same from them.”

“Good. I agree. And this, I hope, will show you how much I don't beat around the bush either.” She pushed a slender check across the table toward him. He picked it up with one hand, his expression maintaining its composure even as he read the six-figure amount.

“If you'll draw up the agreement or whatever, place that on my account to be activated once we have settled our next round of business. Then I will sign whatever you need once you feel free to add me to your client list.”

He folded the check and passed it back to her. “You keep that until our present legal issues are concluded. Then we'll sit down again, Sammi Jo. Suppose you simply tell me what is going on, why I am being wooed with one of the best steak dinners I've

tasted this side of the big city, and is this news going to give me indigestion later?” He pushed his now-empty plate away and settled in to frame her in his sights, in his practiced legal stoicism.

“Besides my sister, you are the only other person to know that I have reached a decision on the items in my grandmother’s codicil. Tomorrow I am going to Fort Worth and sit down with the attorneys there. I will be instructing them that I will not proceed with my grandmother’s ridiculous plan. I will not be holding Beaudry Hawkes to any such agreement or marriage. I will instruct them that the sale of Aces High is to be conducted as originally specified. And that is that. Until you sign on as my lawyer, there will be a few little details I will want you and I to work on, but that will have nothing to do with my grandmother or anyone else. And before you ask—yes, I have spent the last twenty-four-plus hours thinking of nothing else but this decision. I am sure, and I won’t change my mind.”

There was silence. She actually might have stunned Matt for once in his career. He slowly shook his head after a few more moments.

“You are giving up the Aces High. Something that is in your very DNA. Something you were willing to literally sell your very soul, if needed, to protect, enter into an arranged marriage to keep, and now you are going to walk away from it all. I am beyond mystified.”

“You join my sister in that mystification. But it is quite simple when it comes down to it. I love the land, the history, the people, the animals. But it became clear to me that all those things aren’t as important in life as some others. Those others are for me to know and keep to myself. That is the guiding light to me getting through the days ahead. I trust that once the ranch’s attorneys get over their shock and dismay, they will be contacting you and you will all do whatever it is you do to dissolve the last two hundred thirty years of my family.” She had to stop. A very huge knot had become lodged in her throat. She sat quietly, working to maintain composure while it

dissolved. To his credit and her gratefulness, Matt did not offer kind platitudes that would make matters worse. He simply gave her the time she needed.

Clearing her throat, she managed what she hoped was a confident smile. “Life goes on. That is always the most important thing, right? I am luckier than a lot of people. I know that. I need to be grateful for the life I have had and will continue to have as I decide what that will look like. How often do people get to reinvent their lives? And have the finances to be able to do so? I want to do some good along the way, and that will be a large part where you will be needed.”

“Beaudry doesn’t know any of this?”

The question she dreaded had come.

“No. Not yet. I thought I’d get all the legal documents in place and then you would let him know that he is off the hook. He and Lacy can get on with their lives and hopefully forget the upheaval the Burkitts almost caused. And I will drop a document off at your office on my way to the airport tomorrow. I would rather it just stay in the file until I get back.”

“I think for the first time in a very long time, I may have been rendered speechless. But if you want this and are committed to it, then I’ll try to make it as easy as I can for everyone, especially you, my friend. I have an idea how much this is truly costing you. Whatever your reason, it has to be incredibly important to you.”

“Thank you. It is everything. And we will move on to the fabulous strawberry shortcake that is waiting to be served for dessert. It earned Lacy’s seal of approval when they came to dinner one day. Sweets are always good to cheer anyone, don’t you agree?”

\*

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Jaxson said, unloading the last of the feed from his truck bed, stacking it in a corner of the feed storage room. “But thanks for the help with the last of the feed.”

“Your sarcasm is not helpful.”

“Apparently, neither are you today,” came the equally swift response. Jaxson wore his usual calm demeanor, taking off his work gloves and sliding them beneath his belt to secure them. On the other hand, Beaudry was the embodiment of agitation. He put his hands on his hips, his brow furrowed.

“You are supposed to know where your boss lady is, don’t you think? She’s not answering her cell phone. Her truck is gone from the house. Mickey, the gardener, said he saw her leave bright and early this morning, carrying a clothing bag. Surely, she’d tell you if she were heading someplace.”

“All she said yesterday afternoon was that she had to go into the city. It wasn’t any of my business to question why. She said she’d be back in a day or so.”

“Lacy asked her last week if we could go to the drive-in movie this week. She’ll be disappointed.”

“Sorry about that,” Jaxson said. “So, is that where you like taking most of your female friends? For drive-in movies and a pizza? I heard from my fellow coffee drinkers this morning that the two of you were seen in deep discussion over a pizza a couple days ago. You are indeed a romantic fellow and big spender.”

Beaudry paused for a moment. “What does that mean? Female friends? Pizza?”

“Well, as you know, your current love life is the talk of the town. Our local busybody, Melba Tweet, was in the coffee shop this morning, along with Mitzi

Aldridge. You know, when those two have their heads together, it means it will be in the gossip section of Mitzi's paper. I overheard your name as I was coming out of the meeting room after our Stockman's monthly meeting with the county agent. Naturally, being the big brother I am, I asked Tallie if she knew what or whom they were so busy maligning this week. And it seems you made the number one spot again for the third week running. You and a certain Miss Crawford were dining in The Pizza Pie Pantry. They'd like to know what Sammi Jo has to say about it, but I think Tallie took care of that one fast enough."

"What the heck are you—?" He stopped, the light dawning on him. "Two days ago, Lacy and I were stopping by to drop her off for a class pizza party that her teacher and her assistant had arranged to celebrate the students' test scores. I wasn't dining with the teacher. Then Sammi Jo came in and we ended up ordering a pizza together. Only she left because I put my foot in my mouth, and don't even try one of your lame jokes here. I need to find her and get some things straight between us. And that has now become me wining and dining another woman?"

"Seems so. Who knew I would be related to such a celebrity? I do miss the days, though, when I could go into the Coffee and a Chat, sit down, read my local paper in peace and anonymity, have a coffee and cinnamon roll with the guys, and talk about such trivial things as cattle prices, drought and pestilence, the best wormer on the market. The really boring stuff of life."

"It's a good thing you aren't a comic. You would fail miserably. Wining and dining with my daughter along. Guess they overlooked that part of the truth too."



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Well, Lacy has been along on most things with you and Sammi Jo, hasn’t she? None of that stopped you from falling for the woman, did it?”

“Of course not, but it—”

Jaxson’s gotcha grin was huge on his face. “I am so good at this, I should write a column in the newspaper myself. Got you to confess as easy as water slides off a duck’s back in a spring rain.”

“I’ve got work to do.” Beaudry turned on his heel and strode off toward his truck. Jaxson’s gleeful laughter followed him until the slamming door cut it off. The truck churned up the dust along the drive as he punctuated the aggravation he felt with his brother. If that was the latest gossip, had Sammi Jo heard it? He needed to find her and have a chance to get things out in the open. He had the need to explain and hope she could understand his feelings.

He was never one to do that sort of thing in his life, but he hadn’t found himself in that state called love before. It was new territory, and it scared the daylights out of him. He could clearly see that what he had with Sandy Lou had been nothing more than lust, and when she had come up pregnant after their first visit to the swimming hole for some hot afternoon skinny-dipping, well, their futures had more or less been sealed.

But he was wiser now, and he knew what he felt for Sammi Jo was a whole other matter. She infuriated him, intrigued him, wouldn’t stay out of his thoughts no matter how hard he tried to keep her out, and her smile had become a beacon that made something inside him respond with an urge to be at her side and never allow that

smile to disappear. His heart felt lighter when she was around. He enjoyed watching how Lacy bloomed under that same inner light of Sammi Jo's. How would she ever think that she wasn't good enough around kids? She was all of that and more, and she needed to realize that. She would be a wonderful mother-figure for Lacy to grow up with. And if there were other brothers and sisters to come along... if Sammi Jo would ever speak to him again...then that was an amazing thought too.

What if she might not feel the same way? Beaudry had to remind himself that he knew a thing or two about kissing and male and female attraction, which led him to believe she might be having some of the same inclinations. But she needed to trust him first. And then maybe she'd see that there was every possibility they could make this whole thing work out.

Maybe.

That was a big maybe. After all, he had been the one to specify that they use only their brains and never the heart in their agreement. And they had shook on it. But to his way of thinking, a kiss bested a handshake any day of the week.

But he had to find her first. Once again, he dialed her phone from the button on his steering wheel. After leaving yet another message asking her to call him back, he hit the off button. Where was she? Was she all right? Why didn't she answer? All questions he would put on hold while he ran into Matt Mateo's office to tell him he wanted to speed things up.

"Sorry to drop in like this. Your receptionist said you were in court today, but would be breaking for lunch about now," Beaudry explained as Matt motioned him into his office.

"I have time for a few bites of that salad Tallie sent over from the coffee shop, then sign my name on some documents on the front desk that need to go out this afternoon

and then get back to winning my case in front of Judge Kinney. You speak and I will listen as I eat.” They both took seats in unison.

“I want you to get those papers from the Burkitt agreement ready for me to sign as soon as we can. I want to get moving on this, not waste any more time. I don’t need to wait until the end of the month to make my decision. I’ve made it. I agree to the terms. How soon do we need to get the marriage license?”

The fork with the next bite of chef’s salad halted in midair. Matt slowly closed his mouth, a blink of an eye, then the fork went back slowly to rest on the plate. He took his time unfolding his napkin, then wiping his mouth. All the while, his gaze remained on Beaudry, but it was clear his mind was in full throttle.

“You have decided to go ahead and marry Sammi Jonow. No waiting to think more on it, see how things go with Lacy. You are well and truly for going ahead with the agreement.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Is there a problem with jumping on this and not waiting? In the beginning, Sammi Jo was wanting to get this done the day after she told me about the will. But I said I wanted the thirty days. Well, now I am done thinking it over. Is something wrong?”

“I suppose you’ve spoken to Sammi Jo about this change? She’s on board?”

Beaudry shook his head. “I would if I could find her. I’ve tried to call her, and she’s not answering for some reason. Jaxson said she mentioned having to go into the city. But I’m sure she’ll be relieved to get this behind us too. And Lacy and she have hit it off from the get-go. Lacy is crazy about her. I was worried for no reason on that score. I know Sammi Jo will be good for her.”

“And what about you? I take it you realized that the payoff and extra land in the deal

was just too good to pass up. Anyone can stand almost anything for that sweet of a deal, right?”

Beaudry sat forward in his chair. “I’m considering that you’ve had a busy morning so far and you might have been really surprised by my change of attitude, but don’t go thinking that it’s the money and land that makes this a go for me now. It’s not. We were doing just fine before this came along. We managed with a lot of hard work and determination, and we would do the same if it hadn’t.”

“So, are you saying you might have changed your opinion, your feelings even about Sammi Jo? Marrying a Burkitt—that used to be an anathema to a Hawkes. What changed?”

Beaudry looked at the hands clasped in front of him and took a few moments. He wanted to find the right words.

“I’ve been wrong about a few things in my life. One of which was ever letting Sandy Lou Bettancourt into my life. But then again, there was a hidden blessing in it too. If I hadn’t made that mistake, I wouldn’t have my Lacy. So I have to be grateful for that. I just never planned to fall into the marriage trap again. I wanted to raise my daughter and be the best father I could. But I knew one day she would want to know what it’s like to have a mother. Or, at least, I figured that time would come. But she never wanted to meet her biological mother.

“Then one day, Sammi Jo stepped into our lives, and it was as if Lacy bloomed overnight, like a butterfly out of the cocoon. Still, I projected my previous associations with Sammi Jo and her family over the years as something to steer clear of. Sarah Burkitt and her high-handed ways soured me on rich people. And I let that cloud my better judgment and taint what I thought of Sammi Jo—initially. And by so doing, I almost threw away the chance for the best possible thing for Lacy and for myself. I know better now. And I am going after the woman for my daughter and

myself. I think that the three of us can make one heck of a family. For the first time in my life, I can say one hundred percent, without any doubt, I have found the woman I am in love with now and the rest of my days. Is that enough of a confession for you?"

Matt sat back against the leather of his chair, an almost sad look in his eyes. Maybe a bit of envy, also? Beaudry felt that niggle in the pit of his stomach when something unpleasant might be headed his way. The hairs on the back of his neck began to raise.

Matt's gaze was steady.

"Something's wrong. What is it?"

"I'm in one of those places between the rock and that really hard place, as they say. I am bound by legalities of confidentiality when I least need them to be so rigid. But what you just said that you're going after the woman... not a word about the financial part involved. That is what is pushing me right now. And that sappy part about love might also have done me in." He stood, clearing his throat. "I do have those papers out on the front desk I must sign, so I'll leave you to sit here while I go do that. Make yourself at home." His hand struck the file lying on the edge of the desk. He didn't pause to pick up the papers from the floor but shut the door behind him.

Beaudry guessed the man was in too much of a rush and hadn't noticed the mishap. He bent over to retrieve the file and the few papers that had scattered. His gaze caught the name Burkitt right away. As he slowly put the errant papers back into the file, one caught his eye and he gave up trying to be discreet. The first paragraph was all he needed. He tossed the file back on the desk and stood to leave.

The door opened, and Matt moved to his desk, his gaze meeting Beaudry's.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“What is all this about? How long have you known about this? Has she taken leave of her senses? She’ll lose everything she cares about. You’ve got to talk her out of this.”

“I tried, but it was quite evident that is not possible.”

“Explain it then.”

“I’m afraid I cannot. It was by accident that you even saw that paperwork. I’m sure when she gets back to town from Fort Worth, she will explain it to you.”

“You know where she is.”

“Well, I imagine if she is in Fort Worth to speak with her attorneys there, she is probably staying at the ranch condominium. Of course, this is all a guess on my part. Now I do have to get to court. I’m sure we’ll talk about this again soon.”

“Oh, I have no doubt we will. Seems we both need good luck to be with us today.” Beaudry was already out the front door of the law firm before Matt even left his inner office.

Nothing was going to keep him from finding Sammi Jo Burkitt and stopping her from making a mistake that would bring pain to them all.

### Chapter Fourteen

The last person Sammi Jo expected to look up and see walking toward her on the path through the immaculate gardens of the condominium complex was Beaudry Hawkes.

She experienced first an amazing exhilaration at the sight of him. Then, almost immediately, it was a feeling of a balloon deflating. Torn between the sudden desire to run meet him, like in some romantic movie scene, and the desire to run in the opposite direction for fear the truth would hurt more, she simply ended up standing still. Let whatever was coming her way do just that.

His face was still partially obscured by distance and shadows underneath the broad brim of his cream-colored Stetson, but his purposeful strides indicated a man who had something important to discuss with someone. And that someone had to be her.

As he neared, his jawline was hardened and set in squared stone. It was clear by his polished boots, freshly starched and creased denim jeans, and the cream shirt with an open collar beneath the dark tan jacket that he had come to the city on business. Any other time, she would have taken more enjoyment at the good-looking cowboy, emanating strength and male sexuality to make any female take note and her breathing go skittery. But he didn't look like he was merely paying a social call. She stood her ground and waited for him to come to her, drawing a shawl of determination around her shoulders as best she could with no warning.

“Have you done anything?” Those were his first words as he came to a halt mere inches from her. “Please tell me you haven't signed any paperwork that can't be torn up.”

“What are you doing here? How did you find me? And what paperwork are you talking about?”

“I know,” he responded. “And don't ask me how I know. It was all by chance. But what is this nonsense idea about calling off our deal and selling the ranch? If I didn't know better, I'd say you fell and hit your head or something. This is not you. You were ready to fight to your last breath, to go so far as to marry me, to keep your heritage. And now, you say, ‘forget it?’” He took a breath and lowered his voice,

even though they were the only ones visible in the gardens at the hour before sundown. “I know you could easily do without me and Lacy as part of the deal, but you without your home—that is not you. You cannot do without the Aces High. Something’s happened, and I have a right to know what happened to change our agreement and your determination. Did what I said the other night at dinner have anything to do...?”

“No, that doesn’t. It is so much more.”

What would he do if she blurted out the truth? You and Lacy and your lives are more important to me. He’d turn tail and run. Or would he? Was the reason he was so upset right now because he might be losing out on the three million dollars and fifty thousand acres free and clear? That was probably more like it.

“What my grandmother did was wrong on many levels. But it should never have involved you and Lacy. Grandmother often acted without regard to others’ feelings, but I can’t do that. I thought I could. But it isn’t right to expect you to put your lives on hold, basically to appease a stranger’s needs or wants. I reacted selfishly. Now I am going to try my best to change that. You and Lacy won’t be expected to interrupt your lives and the direction you need to go in order to be happy. You are free to have the right people in your lives and make plans and not be shackled for three years. Lacy needs a person who is good for her and will be there forever, not just a visitor. And you deserve a wife—a real one, a much better one than before.”

Beaudry’s gaze was thoughtful and those emeralds gleamed with sparks of thoughts he didn’t voice right away.

Please, just accept this and go away. It was hard to keep from breaking down in front of him. She had no idea just how hard it would be in reality.

“Have you had dinner?”



His question wasn't what she had steeled herself to expect. Her brain had to shift a gear or two. Beaudry took the lead.

"You freshen up or whatever you need to do, and I'll wait downstairs for you. I hear there are a couple good restaurants in walking distance. It looks to be a nice night for some fresh air. I'll walk you back to the lobby." His hand lightly cupped her elbow and they turned in unison toward the building. Her brain was in a quandary. They both stayed silent until they stopped at the elevator doors. He dropped his hand.

Sammi Jo looked up at him. "You don't have to go out to dinner with me. We've—"

"We've both got to eat. And keep something important in mind, Samantha Josephine Burkitt. When have you ever known me to do something I do not want to do? What has ever been strong enough to make me do that? I'll be down here waiting." He was already walking off as the elevator doors slid open and she stepped inside. She watched his departure until she was whisked away.

\*

How many times had she picked up the phone to tell the concierge downstairs to let the man in the cowboy hat waiting for her know that she would not be coming down and he could leave? Only to set it down without dialing. And even while she had rummaged through the closet full of clothing her sister kept in the three-bedroom condo, finally choosing a sleeveless midnight-blue and lime-green swirl-patterned sheath that fell to just above her ankles with a side-slit to the knee, and silver sandals with a bit of heel, so she wouldn't be so dwarfed next to his height—even then, she still toyed with the idea of canceling, but talked herself out of it a half dozen more times. What would it hurt? One last dinner with the man who had come to mean more than she expected. A father and daughter she would have fallen more in love with over that three years and then would have had to let them go? Nothing was ever certain, but her heart was in a tender state from the last few weeks. Too much change,

too many decisions, and she'd made decisions that had caused heartbreak or would most certainly do that the further they all went with the charade. A clean break was always best.

Then why dinner?

Those three words followed her as she grabbed the matching shawl off the bed and headed for the elevator. Beaudry was right there in the lobby, waiting for her. Because it's Beaudry. That simple answer cemented why her heart had overruled her brain. To spend a few more hours in his company before they all went back to their previous lives.

Her heart skipped a beat or two as the very real slow smile of male appreciation transformed his features. She was instantly glad that she had chosen the outfit and then piled her long hair into an easy updo with a couple of silver hairpins, wispy tendrils drifting along the skin of her neck. Her makeup was light, but more than she normally took time for in her day.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

He presented a crooked elbow as she approached. How easily her palm found its perfect perch gliding around it, and his other palm settled over hers. It seemed the most natural movement in the world. If someone didn't know better, they might take them for a real couple. That thought both warmed and saddened her at the same time.

“None of that. No frowns. No unpleasant thoughts to spoil appetites. Let's find some food,” Beaudry said. He led the way outside and they walked along the wide sidewalk, a steady breeze light and cooling in the fading sunlight. Giant oaks along the walk continued with them as they crossed into a second block and then turned into a third one. Halfway down that block, Sammi Jo saw a terraced patio with a multitude of twinkling white lights crisscrossing in the tree branches above it. Colored linen cloths and matching glass bulbs with candles flickering inside them made the patio festive. Early patrons were already being seated both inside and outside the restaurant.

“I am hoping I guessed correctly and had the concierge book us a table on the patio. But we can change and go inside if—” Beaudry said.

“No, please. I like the patio,” she responded, and garnered a grin in return.

Once they were shown to their table, seated, and gave their drink orders, a sudden shyness kept Sammi Jo quiet.

“Don't you hate that feeling?” Beaudry surprised her.

“What feeling?”

“The one you get on your first date when neither person wants to seem like a conversation hog, but each is wondering the best and most brilliant way to start the ball rolling. It is certainly a good thing we don’t have that problem. We can count all the other times we’ve had a meal together already, and that would make this old hat for us. So, no awkwardness at all.” He grinned and gave a wink as he took a sip of the margarita that had just been placed in front of him. She hadn’t picked up her own strawberry daiquiri for fear her hands were still shaking too much from silly nerves. But his teasing made her grin. She reached for her glass, and the ease between them returned.

Beaudry always amazed her.

“I suppose we are old hat,” she acquiesced. “We’ve got a dozen or so years we can count. And only recently have I noticed things I might not have before.”

“This I must hear.” He settled back in his chair and gave her the smile that warmed her insides. Enjoy the night for the memories you can take away.

“Well, you do have a bit of an ego, since I’ve had this conversation with you before.”

“I thought this would be compliments. Sorry I asked.” He took a sip of drink.

“You have a sense of humor. I always took you for being very straitlaced and rigid, before I saw that you do have a softer side.” She grinned. “Don’t worry, the softer side is usually only when Lacy is around. Your secret is still relatively safe.”

“Dare I ask what else?”

“Well, you consider other people and their feelings more than I gave you credit for. I think I labeled you Mr. High and Mighty a few times in the past.”

“How many times was that again?” he challenged her.

“Okay, more than a few. But I have revised that in the last month or so. You are very much respected around Burkitt, especially by the ranch hands. And they don’t give out respect unless one earns it. But the most surprising revelation is that you are an amazing dad. Lacy is a lucky little girl. And you’ve raised her to be an incredible young lady already. That says the most about you, as far as I am concerned. And that is all the building up of your already large enough ego I plan to do.”

He grinned and was about to speak, but their food arrived. Once they were alone and settled back in, he said, “There is one thing I will say I have learned about you that possibly encompasses everything else. I’ve learned that you are far from the spoiled little rich Burkitt I had you pegged as for so long. I was wrong. I listened to the wrong people who were simply jealous of you. I allowed the shadow of your grandmother and her behaviors to cast a shadow over you, as well, and I formed the wrong opinion. For that, I am sorry.”

His sincerity touched her heart. “Thank you. You aren’t the first to think that about me, but it is nice to hear that you have revised it with the truth.”

“I think people just see the name and then huge dollar signs. That is unfortunate. If anything, the woman behind that falsehood is much the opposite. I’ve seen her, so I know.”

“You’ve seen me? That could be good and bad.”

“You do the work of any ranch hand on Burkitt land. You don’t shy away from anything and make it look easy. Seriously, how many females do you know in Burkitt or any town, really, that could sashay up to a full-grown cow, speak sweetly, and then slide an arm all the way up inside her, still being gentle, yet full of business? That can be a pretty sexy sight in itself.”

She stopped chewing and swallowed. “Did you really just say that at the dinner table? You think that palpating a cow is sexy?”

“No. I said you could look sexy, even as you did something that disgusting. So that does set you apart from most females.”

“I don’t know how to respond to what I think is probably the most backward compliment I have ever received but thank you. I think.”

Shared laughter was the best kind, and that was certainly true as she and Beaudry shared the meal. They also shared dessert between them, a sweet crème brûlée that was perfect.

“You know there is something else I want to thank you for, something I didn’t expect to find in you.” The laughter was gone, and a quietness enveloped the corner where they sat, the flickering candlelight giving off its soft golden-hued glow. A warmth flowed into the center of her chest as she was drawn into Beaudry’s gaze. “You opened your heart and your home to include a little girl who thinks you hung the moon and all the stars too. You’ve become a role model that she tries to emulate from the hairstyle to the color of clothing, the books she wants to devour, so she can talk to you about what’s in them, and you filled a place in her world and her heart that none of us expected. You are the key that has fit the right door to open her up to all sorts of new ideas and things in her life. I hope you know that there are no words I can use to express the thanks I have for that. Who knew that I would ever consider Sammi Jo Burkitt an angel in human form? I know I didn’t expect it. But I’m smart enough to be grateful for it.”

And that rock had returned, and she could feel it moving from the center of her chest and growing into a boulder in her throat. She couldn’t breathe, and she was about to embarrass Beaudry with a floodgate of tears. She rose to her feet. “It’s getting late, and I do have a meeting in the morning. We should go.”

Silly fool. She didn't wait while Beaudry settled with the waiter. Sammi Jo felt herself slipping into a spell that was going to be broken in the morning light. The evening needed to end.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Boots sounded on the concrete behind her, then the soft material of her shawl gently enveloped her shoulders. She settled into it and lost her hands inside the folds, grateful to steady them. The cowboy fell into step beside her. His hands slid into the pockets of his jeans as they walked along the pools of light cast on the sidewalk via the vintage streetlamps.

“If I said something wrong, I’m sorry. I don’t know why you’re upset, but that wasn’t my intent. If there is something I can do, let me help. You aren’t in this alone. I hope you know that by now.”

“Don’t.” She stopped walking and they turned to face each other. The concern in his eyes was another arrow to the chest. “You did nothing wrong. I did it. My family did it. I’m just trying to make amends and end it all. I am the one who is truly sorry. Your words are ones I will treasure always. And it’s because I do that I can’t ruin things for you and Lacy. You both deserve to have the life you want with Lacy’s teacher or someone else who might come into your lives. I’d be a barrier to that. I almost ruined your chances with my being selfish and placing more value on things that won’t matter in fifty years. But a family and love—they matter always. If you are lucky enough to have one that is perfect for you, you grab hold of it and don’t let go. You might not get that second chance. I won’t stand in anyone’s way because I was only thinking of what I wanted, what I thought I would die if I didn’t have. But I won’t die. I’ll go on and make something for myself.”

He looked baffled. Shouldn’t he have some relief?

“Don’t tell me that you’ve listened to any of the insane gossip in town from those busybodies. You should know better than most to not take anything they come up



with seriously. A relationship with Miss Crawford, Lacy's teacher? That is ridiculous. Just as I said before."

"No matter who it might be, you don't need to be tied down for three years with some cold, written agreement. That's not living. It's serving a sentence. And I think I'm not that bad a punishment, but it's the freedom to choose for both of us that is the most important."

She had wanted to end on a halfway upbeat note, but it fell flat. The thought of Beaudry and another woman just didn't cut it for her. "Whatever this ages-old feud is between the Burkitts and the Hawkes, if it had anything to do with what my grandmother perpetrated with her will, it's over and done with. It's just a historic footnote no one will really ever pay attention to in the future. It's nothing to us."

Beaudry studied the tip of one boot for several long seconds, the crease in his forehead visible beneath the brim of his hat. Then he lifted his chin and let out a long sigh.

"I see what you're saying. I don't agree with some of it. And an old grudge is dead and buried with your grandmother for all I care. But I do honor my word. And my word is this: I told Matt Matteo today to get that agreement ready for me to sign tomorrow at high noon at the courthouse. I suggest you be there to sign on the dotted line too. Unless you're the type of Burkitt who goes back on a handshake? You and I shook hands, and I don't intend to be the one to break that. A Hawkes knows how to keep his word."

His look and tone were dead serious. Sammi Jo was stunned for a moment. So nothing mattered, really, but that he got the three million and the free land deal. A Hawkes to the end. He thought he could call her bluff? Well, not by a long shot. She met his gaze with her own.

“High noon it is.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“High noon. Should I dust off Granddad’s ivory-handled Colt 45s in the display case downstairs?” Laurel was sitting on the edge of the sofa in the living room, watching Sammi Jo pace back and forth.

“Very funny. I’m twice the better shot than Beaudry Hawkes is, so don’t tempt me. And why you find this so amusing, I do not know. Why are you even here? I am perfectly capable of handling this on my own.”

“I thought I was coming to stop you from throwing away your heritage. But I guess now I just want to make sure everyone comes out alive after the dust settles today.”

“I’m sorry you wasted a trip over this nonsense. I should never have been soft. What was I thinking?”

“You weren’t thinking, not like the usual Burkitt,” her sister agreed. “You were thinking and feeling like a woman with a heart. And that is perfectly acceptable.”

Sammi Jo stopped pacing and looked at her sister. “When you first told me about Grandmother’s ridiculous codicil to her will, you basically said I was a silly fool for wanting to fight to keep all this. Now you find it acceptable that I have such strong feelings. What gives?”

“You weren’t in love back then. You loved things: the land and horses and history. But you hadn’t given your heart to what really matters. You fought a battle for one thing, but in doing that, you really won the whole war. Maybe I just wanted to be here to help you see that you shouldn’t let anger or pride get in the way. Don’t miss your chance to have it all, this land and the people on it that you love. And don’t waste my

time or yours denying that you fell lock, stock, and barrel for Beaudry Hawkes. Who knows? Maybe this was Grandmother's true plan after all? If Grandmother hadn't been such a stickler for the oldest of the two of us being executor and the one to speak with the lawyers at the reading of the will, then you could have asked your questions of them. But given her nature, it was and is one way to settle an old feud, joining the two families once and for all. She always was a wily old coyote."

"If this was Sarah Burkitt's backhanded way of settling anything, she should have told me so. No matter what, I'll watch that man sign and then I will do the same. Whatever happens next, it will just be business. He sticks it out, he'll get his filthy money and land."

"Said like a true Burkitt." Laurel grinned. "I think I'm sorry I'm all the way over on the West Coast and won't be close enough to see these fireworks unfold. It might make an interesting story for one of my movies."

"Don't you even think of writing such a thing. But you should think about coming back to Texas. We have something here in Texas you won't ever find in Hollywood."

"What would that be? Tornadoes, rattlers—"

"Jaxson Hawkes."

Laurel stood, shot Sammi Jo a pointed look. "Subject closed. And the clock is ticking. We don't want to be late for our first gunfight on the town square."

\*

Jaxson checked the scene outside the attorney's office through the louvered wooden shutters for the umpteenth time.

“What are you doing? Who are you looking for?”

Jaxson didn't turn to face Beaudry. “I'm just making sure there won't be too many bystanders to get in the way of the fight. Don't need any collateral damage in this Burkitt-Hawkes battle. I just wish I had thought sooner about selling tickets for seats to it. That would have brought in some good money there. Don't you think, Matt?”

The attorney was propped back in his high-backed leather chair, his feet crossed on top of the edge of the broad mahogany desk in front of him. He had an amused smile. “It's not too late to take some bets. Of course, as an officer of the court and all, I am not condoning gambling.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“You both are not funny. I don’t know why I confided in either of you.” Beaudry stood and did his third round of pacing.

“Because you need witnesses,” Matt spoke up.

“Or someone to pick you up off the ground after she decks you when this crazy idea of yours goes south,” Jaxson added matter-of-factly. He half turned from his post at the window. “Hey, Matt, you got a first aid kit handy by any chance? We might take that along just in case.”

“Good idea. I think we have one out in the front office.”

“I realize you two are enjoying this, but just remember, one of these days, I’ll be doing the same for each of you, and we’ll see about some payback then.”

Jaxson shook his head and turned back to the window. “Won’t be for me. I have enough headaches with four-footed females. Matt’s the true Romeo in this group. He’ll be the one.”

Matt shook his head. “To please one woman’s fantasy would be to break many other hearts. I would not want to be responsible for that.”

That brought coughs and sputters from both Hawkes brothers and a wide grin from the attorney.

All that ended abruptly when Jaxson said, “I see the Aces High truck headed around the square. It’s showtime, boys.”

Across the street, the trio went, serious faces all. Beaudry was flanked on either side by Jaxson and Matt.

“I just had a thought. Remember the scene from that movie? You’re Wyatt Earp,” Jaxson said. “And you’re dressed fancy enough to be Doc Holliday, Matt. Guess that makes me—”

“An idiot,” Beaudry finished the sentence for him. They came to a stop at the top of the courthouse steps. It was noon, so most of the offices had closed and visitors in the building was few and far between at that hour. The truck parked and both doors opened. He had eyes only for Sammi Jo.

“Surprise, surprise,” Jaxson whispered in his ear. The passenger had stepped into full view, and his brother clearly had his gaze homed in on Laurel. No one would really know that because the dark shades hid the direction of his gaze well. But Beaudry knew exactly who he was talking about.

“Looks like the gang’s all here and then some.” Matt brought their attention to the gathering bodies under the shade trees on the surrounding lawn and those enjoying their brown bag lunches from their office windows, all settled in to watch the show unfold.

“Wonder how word passed so fast? Which one of you blabbed?” Beaudry whispered while maintaining a straight face.

“Here goes the peace and quiet again of my morning coffee at the café. You’ll be all I’ll hear and read about for a week or more.” Jaxson moaned.

“Nah. Stuff this good? Give it three weeks,” Matt chimed in.

Beaudry simply shot a glance upward, possibly seeking some divine intervention in

the moment.

“That’s a smart man,” Laurel said sweetly as they reached the trio. “He’s saying a prayer.”

Matt stifled a chuckle—or tried to.

“Are you seriously going through with this? You can change your mind, you know. Three years is a long time. I gave you an out. Take it.” Sammi Jo met Beaudry’s steady gaze with her own.

“As far as I’m concerned, it isn’t long enough. And I don’t need an out from anything. Matt’s brought the agreement.” The attorney produced the document from inside his suit pocket and handed it over to Beaudry.

Laurel was quick and produced a writing pen, giving it over to Sammi Jo.

“Ladies first.” Beaudry nodded.

Sammi Jo only had a moment’s hesitation. Then she signed where Matt indicated. She shoved the paper back into Beaudry’s outstretched hand.

Beaudry looked over the paper once more. Then he handed the pen back to Laurel, who took it with a puzzled look toward her sister. They all watched in silence as Beaudry held up the paper in his hand as though he were showing it off to all assembled. Slowly, his fingers began to tear the document into long shreds, his gaze still on a shocked Sammi Jo. He then tore those six long pieces sideways in the same manner and handed them all over to Matt.

“We wouldn’t want to be arrested on the courthouse steps for littering.”

“Are you out of your mind? Is this some sort of joke?” Sammi Jo was clearly at a loss.

\*

“Joke? No. I am very serious. And I am not out of my mind, at least not any longer.” Beaudry had fixed his gaze on Sammi Jo, oblivious to anything else around them. He knew without a doubt that this moment and day would forever be the one etched into his memory when others may have faded. A slight clearing of throat from his friend beside him and he remembered what came next.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Jaxson's hand had been inside his pocket. Beaudry looked at him and then something was produced and passed from his palm into Beaudry's. He felt the warmth of the smooth metal in his palm. It was strong and would last until the end of time. Just like what I feel for the woman in front of me. A loud, collective gasp rose like a wave across the lawn as he slowly went down on one bended knee.

"I'm not very good with words. And you deserve a poet who can do you justice. But the words I do say here today, I mean. They are my oath, my vow to you. I'm not signing any document except a marriage license that is waiting inside this courthouse right now. This is not a business deal I want to make with you, Samantha Josephine Burkitt. I am here on bended knee stating in front of God, our family, and assorted friends, and some strangers that I love you and no piece of paper or old woman's cunning is going to change that. If anything, Sarah Burkitt decided we were two people who were too blind or stubborn to see what was right in front of us. The simple truth is, this is our lives—yours, mine, and Lacy's. And to make certain everyone gets the details correct in the gossip column this week, I am doing this in front of the whole county as my witnesses.

"I am offering my heart for the first time in my life. I am asking for you to do me the greatest honor and agree to marry me, be my wife and mother to Lacy for as long as we both walk this earth. Those are the only terms I care about, the only deal I am interested in. I want to marry the woman whose heart is bigger and tougher than anything in the state of Texas. So, yes or no, Sammi Jo?" His palm opened to show the ring he clutched there—a simple square-cut diamond solitaire that shot sparkles of color into the sunshine.

A pin could have been heard dropping in the total silence of the moment, even with

so many people waiting with breaths held in check. Sammi Jo's head began a very slow shake.

Was it a no?

Laurel coughed under her breath. A slow smile began on Sammi Jo's lips and soon had spread to outshine the brilliance of the diamond itself. "A Burkitt and a Hawkes. Who would have thought it? No one but Grandmother. And it's ayes, Beaudry Hawkes. I will marry you and accept your terms. Because I love you right back, you crazy cowboy."

"She said yes!" The crowd began to broadcast the words in waves spreading throughout the square, with added clapping and loud hoots of celebration.

\*

Sammi Jo felt her feet lift from the ground in an instant, more cheers went up all around them, and then she looked down into the face of the man who swung her around until she felt lightheaded. Or maybe it was the kiss he claimed as he returned her feet slowly to the ground that was the cause of it all. Either way, it was several long moments before either of them returned to earth and those courthouse steps. Beaudry slipped the ring on the proper finger, and Sammi Jo found she fit perfectly inside the arms that held her as if he would never let go. And that would be fine with her.

"You do know how to make a statement, Mr. Hawkes," she said, grinning up at him, moisture filling the corners of her eyes.

"I was inspired, Miss Burkitt. If we are burying an old feud today, nothing else seemed appropriate to let as many people know that no piece of paper is going to tell either one of us who to love or for how long. And there isn't a price tag big enough to

hang on the love we will share the rest of our days. Now, before Lacy escapes the judge's chambers upstairs where she has had her face glued to the window watching all of this, we best get up there and say those vows. That's what you ordered me to do not long ago. Remember?"

"I remember how I thought you would toss me outside your gate and lock it once you heard me out."

"I was tempted to do just that. But I had to do something to prove that those gorgeous, pleading blue eyes hadn't roped me into them from the first moment. I knew you were going to stir things up, but I had no idea just how much."

"I won't change. You know we are both too stubborn for our own good sometimes."

"Yes, and I do not want you to change one thing. Because I also hear that the making up after a couple argues is pretty incredible. I am certainly game if you are." The grin he shared made her heart do some pretty incredible somersaults.

"Bring it on. But I think you're right. We best say those vows as fast as we can get up those stairs." She couldn't contain the loud whoop of happiness that escaped her as Beaudry scooped her off her feet into his arms and made good on her command.

## Epilogue

"Here's to you, little brother. I stand amazed that you made it through your wedding and honeymoon to this day and now are just an old married man." Jaxson handed over the cold bottle of beer to Beaudry as they stood in a semi-quiet corner of the back porch while the party was still in full swing on the other side of the huge ranch house. Then he drew out another bottle from his other pocket of his formal Western suit jacket and handed it off to Matt. Only he added a crisp hundred-dollar bill along with the beer.

“And where is my money?” Beaudry asked. “I think you got mixed up and meant to give me a wedding present too.”

“Your brother is paying off a bet he owes.” Matt nodded at Jaxson. “I won and he lost. Thanks for being a good loser.” He raised the bottle in salute before he took a swallow.

“What bet?”

Jaxson shook his head. “Nothing really.”

“Nothing? My tightfisted brother wagers a hundred on anything, that is major news. Heck, even if you put out twenty, that’s not like you. Spill.”

“I bet several weeks ago that you had met your match going up against a Burkitt. That you might find Sammi Jo a force you hadn’t reckoned on. And I was right.” Matt smiled in triumph.

“Well, I thought my brother was made of sterner stuff. I was wrong. You folded like a cheap tent in the first bit of brisk breeze. And cost me one hundred big ones.”

Beaudry shook his head. “I cannot believe my friend and my brother would bet on such a thing.”

“Yes, you can. You usually are the one instigating the bets around here. We just learned from the best.” Matt grinned.

“That’s okay.” Beaudry nodded. “I freely admit I am leaving you both to be the remaining members of the Old Bachelors’ Club of Burkitt, Texas. I have succumbed to the arrow from Cupid’s bow or whatever that little fat guy uses. And I could not be happier. I would tell you two to try it, you’d like it, but then who is left in these parts

that hasn't already given you both a wide berth as marriage material? I might have to start advertising for you both on that dating program."

"No thanks. I like my freedom just fine," Matt said, standing from his perch beside Beaudry on the porch railing.

"Double that for me. This is one cowboy who won't be dangling from any female's rope. Not a one I've met has made me that crazy."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

“Sorry to interrupt such an enlightening conversation, gentlemen, but the bride needs a partner for the first dance.” Laurel Burkitt stepped from the shadows at the bottom of the porch steps, a hint of a smug smile as she had caught them out. Just how much had she heard, though?

“Did I tell you yet how exquisite you look this evening in that sea-blue chiffon gown? It brings out the blue in your eyes and—”

“Green, Mr. Attorney.” Jaxson’s words were just above a whisper as he headed down the steps. “Best rest your case before it’s totally a loss.”

For a brief moment, Laurel’s gaze met Jaxson’s, and Beaudry could have sworn there was a charge that singed the atmosphere. But it was short-lived as Jaxson headed off toward the rest of the party.

Laurel’s expression gave away nothing of the silent exchange. “Best help the groom straighten his tie for the photographs. I’ll tell them you’re on your way.” Her long skirts rustled as she turned and made her way along the path.

“I have a feeling a bet might be in order.” Matt looked at Beaudry with a grin. “Which one of those two is going to give it up first and admit how they feel about each other?”

Beaudry patted his tie into place and shook his head. “A word to the wise, Matt, as a man who has succumbed—and very happily, I might add—to a Burkitt woman already. My brother never had a chance in this romantic duel. He’s just too stubborn to admit it. Now, I have a beautiful wife to claim for a dance. Let’s get moving.”

\*

“I had no idea you could dance, Mr. Hawkes, and a waltz to boot. It was a very nice surprise.” Sammi Jo grinned up at her husband as his arms brought her against his chest after they had led with the first dance of the evening. Now it was the best man and the maid of honor they watched in a spirited two-step.

“Are they dancing or arguing? It looks too close to call. And they definitely aren’t smiling.” Beaudry made the commentary as the couple on the dance floor was mercifully joined by the rest of the wedding party.

“With those two, who can tell?” Sammi Jo responded.

“Well, at least family holiday dinners won’t be boring.” Beaudry grinned and swung her back onto the dance floor.

Three dances later, Sammi Jo excused herself and went in search of her sister, who was sampling the dishes on the appetizer table.

“Have you seen Lacy? I can’t seem to find her anyplace. And thanks for being civilized on the dance floor earlier with Jaxson. Although he looked like a man with a too-tight necktie and you looked like—”

“Like a woman wanting to aim the pointed end of my shoe where it might inflict the most pain in a pompous cowhand?” Laurel smiled with innocent sweetness. “Last time I saw my charming new niece, she was headed toward that old swing in the far corner of the backyard. I hope you’ve had that thing checked out. It is so ancient.”

“Right. I need to go check on my daughter. I will—” Sammi Jo stopped still for a moment.

“Sounds funny, doesn’t it? I’m an aunt—and an awesome one at that, sort of like an Auntie Mame. But you...my little sis is a mom now.”

“That’s the first time I’ve said that out loud. It is a bit strange, but very nice too.”

Laurel leaned over and gave her a swift hug. “It won’t be strange for long. You already have the makings of a great mother. It’s all about love, isn’t it? You’ve got that in spades. Now move it. My makeup can’t take much more schmaltz tonight.”

“It’s your fault. This fancy party after we got back from our honeymoon was all your idea, if you recall. And a very awesome one at that.”

“It’s time we celebrate the good things happening in our family from now on. There’s a new generation of Burkitts taking on the future on this land. Let this be just the beginning.”

A few minutes later, Sammi Jo smiled at the picture the little girl made.

“How do you like this old swing of mine?”

The little girl in the pale-pink party dress, the long-ruffled skirt bunched up to allow her legs to barely touch the ground with the tips of her new silver party shoes, looked a bit startled for a moment. Sammi Jo trailed her long, white chiffon skirt over the soft grass. The strapless, heart-shaped bodice molded to her figure and displayed the delicate pearl necklace that had been Beaudry’s mother’s when she had become a bride. That and her wedding ring had been the only jewelry his mother ever owned in her life, Beaudry had told Sammi Jo the day he gave the box to her.

“It isn’t quite as grand as Burkitt ladies are used to wearing, but it meant a lot to her when she gave it to me right before she died. You don’t have to wear it, but I—”



“There isn’t anything I could ever wear that would mean more to me than this necklace, except for my wedding ring. I will be honored to wear it on our day and then keep it safe for Lacy and any wife Jaxson might have, and so forth. It is a true family heirloom, and I cherish it as such.”

She had meant those words. After all, it was all about heritage. A family built itself on such a foundation, and others to come after had to preserve it, add to it, and pass it on.

“Is it okay if I sit in your swing? It’s really a cool swing.”

“Of course. You can sit in it anytime. It’s made for swinging and daydreaming. Hang on and let me give you a push.” She moved behind Lacy and settled her hands just above Lacy’s on the thick ropes. A push and then another, and the pair were content in silence for a few moments.

“Are you having fun tonight? Did you enjoy the dancing? You and your dad looked perfect on the dance floor together. One of these days, when you are grown up and you find someone special, I imagine you and he will dance another father-daughter dance. Only you’ll be the one in white... or whatever color you might choose. We’ll just celebrate your special day. But I think there’s something else on your mind right now besides a party. Is it a secret?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:19 pm*

The girl's slow nod gave her the answer. She paused the swing. "There's a bench on the other side of that tree. How about we go over there?"

Once they were seated on the black wrought iron seat, Sammi Jo opened her palm and Lacy placed hers inside it. It was a small thing, but a little routine they'd established over the last few weeks whenever one or the other wanted to discuss something. It formed a bond of trust.

"So what has your mind in such deep thought today?"

"I heard one of the ladies in the kitchen say that you and my dad got married because you gave him a lot of money. Is that true?"

So the time had come. It was bound to happen. Now to deal with it.

"Remember the day that you and I rode up to the top of my favorite hill, the spot where you can see forever and beyond? That is a lot of land, more than most people will ever see, much less own. We earned it the hard way over many generations who had to fight for it. Many lost their lives. And on this land, we have animals that are famous in their own right, like our racehorses, or the stallions and mares who pass on the best genes in horseflesh.

"To help pay for all that, my granddad, and others before him allowed oil to be drilled to be sold to help across this country. That makes this not only a ranch but a big business. We have many bills to pay and many people who depend on us for their jobs. And also, that makes people jealous of us. They will say things they don't know anything about and can be hurtful. But you have only to know that we take care of

our land, our people, our responsibilities. The rest is just gossip to be ignored. Your dad and I married because we fell in love. And he proposed to me in front of most of the town so everyone would understand how much we both wanted to be married—and no amount of money was involved when we said our vows that day. We would have done the same thing, even if we were poor as mice and only had a tent to live in. Our hearts wanted each other. You'll understand that one day when you grow up. My 'gold' is when I feel your hand and your dad's inside mine. Don't ever forget that."

Lacy nodded and smiled.

Sammi Jo continued, "A heritage is something that is very important to all the people who come here to live and to the people who haven't even come here yet, like any brothers and sisters you might have. And when you get married and have a family, it will be theirs also and so forth and so on. We take care of it now, just as others took care of it for us before we came along. Someday, you will take care of it, and on it will go. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's something that you love and take care of. Daddy said you loved this place like you love us."

"Yes, Lacy. I do love it. But the most important thing on this land is not the animals. It isn't all those stinky wells you don't like but help pay to feed those animals you love. And it isn't about the town or the ranch hands who live here. It is about you and your dad—the people I came to know and love. Love the land, take care of it, because it takes care of the people you love. That is the heritage from one generation to another. Make sense?"

Lacy nodded. "I get it. And I promise to learn to take care of it too. Just like you do."

"I know you will. And we'll all take care of each other. How about that for a deal?"

“Sounds like the best deal ever to me.” Beaudry stood not too far away with a smile and a gaze that spoke just how much he loved them. Lacy ran to draw him closer, and she earned her spot on his hip. Lacy looked at Sammi Jo.

“I have a special secret. I can tell you now because it came true. The night before my dad proposed to you, I said an extra special prayer that He let you be in our family because we loved you so much.”

Sammi Jo’s eyes couldn’t hold back the tears. “I’ve never been someone’s prayer before. My heart can’t get any fuller of love than it is right now for you both.”

“You are two people’s prayer, and never forget that.” Beaudry’s gaze held all the love and promises she could ever hope to be worthy of if she lived to be a hundred.

Lacy reached a hand toward to Sammi Jo. “I also said I wanted you to be my mom. I hope you want to do that for a long time.”

She stood and wrapped her palm around the small one. Sammi Jo felt a lightning bolt through the connection that drew the three of them into the center of her heart, where fireworks shot off in glorious abandon. She wasn’t standing on the outside looking in, and she didn’t have to act a certain way or do things to make someone want her around. These two people had chosen to want her to be part of their family and loved her for herself. She knew where her true wealth was now. This man, this child, this was Sammi Jo Burkitt Hawkes’s true heritage. And she knew in that moment, without a doubt, that her very wily and wise old grandmother had not only planned to make amends for a feud ages-old, but to open the doorway for the next generation to walk through, hand in hand.

And right on cue, in the distance of the darkening skies, light faded across the vast Burkitt lands, and a coyote’s wail echoed in triumph beneath a full rising moon across time and a true Texas heritage that would withstand the ages.

The End