



The Texas Cowboy's Rescue

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: This charge nurse and helicopter pilot bring a new twist to flight risk...

Single mom Kenzie Calhoun has returned to Burkitt, Texas, and the Aces High Ranch determined to build a loving home. She has a new position as a nurse on an air medical evac team, a house to remodel, and a whip-smart six-year-old daughter to raise. After a disastrous marriage, the walls around her heart are high. There's no room for another mistake in the romance department. Major Deke Hayes takes pride in his air evac helicopter service that assists area ranches, including the Aces High, during roundups and predator removal. In his spare time, he flies emergency calls for the local hospital. But his call sign, Lone Wolf, says it all: his trust issues mean he flies through life solo, too. That is, until precocious Brooke Calhoun, with a penchant for climbing trees and a fondness for sprinkles on cupcakes, can't help but bring the two adults together with her antics. Will Kenzie and Deke see that sometimes walls have a way of crumbling in the face of second chances?

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Chapter One

“Lordy, lordy, that is one fine pilot... and I ain’t talking about his flying skills. If I ever need rescuing, please send him fast.” Britt Connors sank down in the chair in front of the computer screen. The nurses’ station on the third floor had a prime view of the elevators down the hallway. The papers in her hand forgotten, covert glances continued toward the tall figure in a red jumpsuit who stood waiting for an elevator to open.

“I think a lot of mouth-to-mouth might be needed for me.” Carrie, the nursing assistant, added her two cents into the conversation, glances moving in rotation between the notes in front of her to the male in red.

“When you two get finished crushing on that pilot, perhaps you could help the patient in 312 get out of bed and get ready for a trip down to X-ray, Nurse Connors? And Carrie, you have vitals to take before your shift ends.”

“Come on, Kenzie, spill it... you’ve worked with him in the tight confines in his helicopter. What’s he really like?” Britt spoke up, adding a wink to her question. She and Kenzie had known each other since grade school, so she could get away with speaking in such a familiar way to the charge nurse on certain occasions. “You’re the only female in this hospital... probably in the whole town... not having breathing problems when he comes on the floor. Eligible men are in short supply around here in case you haven’t noticed. And one that looks like him? He is one hot commodity.”

“Yes, I have worked with him. And it’s because I grew up and out of the stage of crushing on boys in my teens that I can behave like a responsible adult with work to

do. I can tell you that he is a private person, and you won't get much conversation from him. He takes care of his job."

They shook their heads with reluctance. "He's awfully quiet."

"Believe me, he isn't much for communicating with his fellow humans unless he must in the course of the job. His call name on the side of his chopper is appropriate... Lone Wolf. Therefore, I wouldn't be wasting time on an arrogant flyboy type that is too important for mere mortals. End of that subject. Now let's get moving so shift change can begin."

Pulling away from the hospital parking lot an hour later, Kenzie left her window down and enjoyed the fresh air that was cooling from the heat of the day. She hoped it would air out the clutter in her brain left over from the conversation between her female staff concerning the pilot. She didn't care for gossip and her staff knew that. There was a fine line she walked between being seen as a super-strict witch and still exhibiting that she was a human with emotions, just like all the others. And she had allowed her personal history to get the best of her for a moment with her last comments. Well, nothing she could do about it now.

But there was an extenuating circumstance when it came to the Lone Wolf. He reminded her far too much of someone else... the same aloof arrogance, appearing far above any other mortal. Almost to the point of condescension. He issued orders and others were to follow. And that all added up, along with his hot looks, to make him catnip to females. She had fallen once and that was more than enough. She knew her job and was good at it or she wouldn't have been sought out for his team by the head of the trauma unit. She had agreed to try it on for three months. And the money was very good. It would certainly be worth ignoring the things about their pilot that irritated her. She was a single mom who intended that her daughter have every chance as she grew up. Suck it up.

The first step was deciding to leave the city and come back to Texas, back to the old ranch house where she and her sister had lived with their mother for most of their lives. A lot of elbow grease and a good part of her savings to that point had gotten it to a place that was home. That had been a good decision. And good decisions were all she was interested in making.

Five minutes later, Kenzie shifted gears from nurse to mom, and the hospital and a certain pilot were left behind. She pulled into her neighbor's driveway and exited her car. On cue, Jackie came out onto the front porch of the house, a couple of glasses of iced tea in her hands. She handed one over to Kenzie at the top of the steps. Kenzie wasted no time in taking a long drink from it.

"This is why you are such an incredible neighbor and best friend. You know what I need after a long day like this one."

"I am pretty perfect, aren't I? Sit down and take a load off those loafers. You can spare a few moments to breathe." She motioned Kenzie into the rocking chair across from the one she made herself comfortable in. Kenzie hesitated but a second and followed her hostess's suggestion.

"Did I say the word perfect? I don't recall that," Kenzie kidded back, taking another sip. She began to shed the day's traumas and headaches. The peace and quiet of the country setting was a balm. A few moments later, her head cocked at a listening angle. "Is that quiet I still hear? That can't bode well. Not with your two and my one in the vicinity. Or did you finally sell them to the circus?"

"Believe it or not, they are in the backyard, with a bowl of popcorn and juice bottles, and doing some finger painting... I believe the subject is our goldfish posing for them in their bowl in the center of the picnic table." Then she stopped. Her head cocked into mom-listening mode.

“They have been quiet for almost fifteen minutes, though.” Automatically, both mom radars had kicked in and they stood in tandem, relaxation and teas forgotten. Around the side of the house they went, and they found the picnic table with Jackie’s two children seated, munching away and intent on their fish masterpieces.

“Where’s Brooke?” Jackie asked. That brought a small shrug from her daughter, Ashton. Thomas looked up at his mother, then his eyes gave a swift glance skyward and he, too, returned to his endeavor. Kenzie got the message loud and clear. Looking at one of the two tall trees in the shaded yard, she saw a pair of small white sneakers, with bright-pink and green laces, dangling from a branch, while the rest of the body was concealed by the shield of thick green leaves. Kenzie shook her head as she moved forward, the grass keeping her footsteps quiet. She came to a halt below the branch that had sprouted the feet, bare legs now in view. Then there was a telltale giggle from above.

“Brookelynn Calhoun, what did we discuss about a certain little girl climbing a tree with no adult present?”

The leaves began to shake and Kenzie was about to speak again with firmer instructions when the pair of legs was replaced by her daughter’s grinning face as she had switched, legs draped over the concealed branch, and her head a few inches from Kenzie’s startled gaze.

“What did I just say?”

“A certain little girl shouldn’t climb without a grown-up here, but I’m not a little girl, Mama. I’m a circus monkey, like in the cartoon we watched!” She followed that statement with a fit of giggles.

Kenzie kept a straight face as best she could. She should be used to her daughter’s antics, but there was always a surprise or two lurking around the corner. She lifted

her arms. “Get down here right now. Come on.” More leaves shook and a few ended up falling on the pair of them as the child made a semi-graceful plummet toward the ground, broken by Kenzie’s arms.

She soon ended up with her feet planted firmly on the ground. A few more errant leaves had managed to adorn the jet-black hair braided into two long ropes, with purple ribbons at their ends. A pair of large violet eyes rimmed by naturally dark lashes gazed up in impish innocence. It was an elfin face, adorning a small body, but also lending disarming capabilities when she chose to unleash her powers of persuasion on some unsuspecting new acquaintance. Kenzie had been well aware of her daughter’s persuasive powers since the moment she arrived in the world, casting that violet gaze on hers and locking her tiny fingers around her pinkie.

The message had been clear from the start. Hold tight, Mama. It’s going to be a wild ride. And every day had been an adventure for the last six years, soon to be seven. Brookelynn Sarafina Calhoun was one of a kind. And Kenzie was blessed to have been chosen to be her mother... even if she would probably be totally gray by the time she hit thirty-five, thanks to her daughter’s penchant for antigravity-defying exploits.

“It’s time to get this monkey home and feed her. Thank Ms. Jackie for being ringmaster today for a circus of monkeys.”

“Thank you, Ms. Jackie. It was really fun and the cookies were super. You need to teach my mom how to make them.” This came as a muffled hug slid around the woman’s waist.

“Your mom is the one who gave me that recipe, young lady.”

Brooke motioned with her finger for the woman to bend closer as she whispered. “But Mom makes the edges funny and brown, and they crunch. I like the way yours are nice and smooth and gooey. She might need your help.”

“And on that note,” said Brooke’s mom, the person needing cookie help, “we need to head home.”

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“This isn’t the way to our house,” Brooke spoke up a few minutes later, noting the scenery as they drove past the familiar town square with its ornate courthouse. The sun was sliding behind the hills in the west and the streetlights were coming on along the almost empty sidewalks in front of the storefronts that were in various stages of closing for the evening.

“I know, but I got a text from one of the nurses who needs me to sign off on some special orders that just came through for a night duty nurse for a patient on our floor. I promised the physician that I’d make certain it all went okay. I won’t be long. And how about we grab a bite in the cafeteria, since we don’t want to have to cook so late when we get home?”

“Oh boy! Do you think they’ll have my favorite chocolate cake with the sprinkles?”

“I think they just might, but that’s only if your plate doesn’t have any vegetables or meat left on it. Especially since you had those gooey cookies earlier.” Kenzie had to shake her head. Their hospital cafeteria happened to be one of those anomalies... a cafeteria that actually had people wanting to eat in it. That was thanks to Jackson Monroe, who could cook Southern food like someone’s grandmother and yet make it healthy in the process. And he had a special soft spot for Brooke and knew that the sprinkles on a cake would get her every time.

They went straight up to the third floor, where Brooke waited in her mom’s office while she spoke to the nurse pulling the private duty post and took care of the paperwork the hospital was waiting on. There was a sigh of relief from Brooke when

Kenzie finally motioned they could leave. She skipped ahead to punch the button for the first floor on the elevator panel.

It was relatively quiet in the cafeteria when they arrived. Brooke checked out the dessert cart first of all. “Okay, concentrate on the entrée first. And you know how to earn a trip to the desserts.” Kenzie was being her usual mom self and inserting parental reality.

Brooke gave a slow nod. “I remember. And I’m going to get the chicken strips, mashed potatoes and broccoli. Then I’ll get the strawberry cake. I just wish the other cake was in its place.”

“Well, a clean plate will earn you a trip to that table. Let’s get our trays.”

The cafeteria had been remodeled recently and it was a pleasant area for the visitors and staff. The ceilings were high, and in the center was an atrium filled with green plants and a small water feature. On one side of the dining room, there was a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked over an expanse of lawn, and in the distance, down the hill, there was a nice view of the town. Kenzie enjoyed a ritual of morning coffee at a table next to the window so she could have a few moments of quiet before she began her day, usually with a view of the sunrise waking up the valley below.

Brooke chose a table at the far side of the room that had a nice view of the fading sunset. She wasted little time working on the food on her plate. Kenzie took a little slower approach with her chef’s salad and mixed fruit side dish.

“That man keeps looking at us,” Brooke whispered across the table. “Is he a doctor here? Do you know him?”

Kenzie ignored the first reaction to simply turn around and see who she might be talking about. She hadn’t paid much attention to the identities of the other patrons...

maybe four other occupied tables spread across a good-sized room. “First of all, don’t stare back. You need to finish your food so we can get home at some point today.”

Very slowly, Kenzie rose with her tea glass in hand and moved to the drink cart where she refreshed her drink and then turned back toward the table. Her glance was meant to be just that. But her gaze met and stumbled across a too familiar one. She was about to place a social smile on her face when the man simply turned his attention back to his food. She was dismissed. It rankled her, but why had she expected anything more from him? Kenzie took her seat and found her appetite might have been left somewhere between their table and the tea cart.

“Yes, I do know him. He is the pilot I work with.” She didn’t plan on any more explanation.

Brooke came alive. “Pilot? He flies the helicopter? Really!? Do you think he’d let me ride in it sometime? Could you take me to see it? I think it would be so cool.”

Kenzie was surprised at her reaction. “I had no idea you were even listening when I was telling Ms. Jackie about my new assignment. What brought about this interest in flying?”

“I think it would be awesome to take off and fly wherever you want to go.”

“Well, we don’t take off and fly wherever we would like. We are sent to places where there are seriously hurt patients who need to get to the hospital very fast.” She didn’t get to elaborate as her pager sounded. Kenzie sighed and pushed the rest of her dinner away. “I’m going to have to run back up to the floor for a moment. I know you have worked on your dinner and are almost done, with the dessert cart calling soon. So I will run upstairs while you sit here and finish, and then we’ll see about that cake. Okay?”

“I’m okay. I’ll finish my dinner and sit right here until you get back.”

“And if you need anything,” Kenzie nodded toward the slender older man checking on the food line. He looked up and nodded in their direction. “Mr. Monroe is right here, and he always has an eye out for you. I’ll hurry.”

“Mom, I’ve got this. I’m not a baby.”

Kenzie limited her grin at the words. She had news for her little girl that, even when she reached her twenties, she would still be her little baby and that would reach well past her twenties even. But she’d let her think what she would. She couldn’t resist dropping a quick kiss on her child’s forehead as she left the table. As she passed the salad bar, Jackson nodded. “Don’t worry about little missy. We’ve got our eye on her.”

“I know,” Kenzie smiled in return. “You all are so sweet. I’ll be right back.”

Right back ended up stretching to fifteen minutes instead of the five or less she had thought. The elevator was taking its sweet time, to her irritation. Especially after she made a quick call downstairs when she saw she might be running longer and heard from Jackson that Brooke was enjoying her cake with Kenzie’s partner. Partner? And then Jackson described him, and she knew. She ended up taking the stairs down. Whatever had transpired while she was gone?

It was true. Her daughter was still at their table, but she was in the midst of a laughing fit. And while she couldn’t see the man’s face, only his back, it was clear that he was also amused by the slight movement of his broad shoulders. Kenzie was mystified. Brooke saw her first.

“Mama, there was only strawberry cake for dessert, but Mr. Deke asked Mr. Jackson for some sprinkles and he got some for my cake, so now this one is my favorite.”

“Since that slice is almost gone, I think I can see how much you enjoyed it. Did you remember your manners and thank him for the sprinkles?”

Deacon Hayes had pushed back his chair and stood at her arrival. Was that the remnant of a smile on his face? It was odd, but she didn't remember seeing one of those in the couple of weeks they had been working together. Granted, they had been on a half-dozen flights only, but she had been surprised when Dr. Damian had asked her to consider joining the air evac team after she had been drafted to help in an emergency involving her cousins during a flood situation. He had explained they could use someone with her level of skill to get the program off the ground... no pun intended.

She had also realized that an added plus would be that she would be able to return home, to Burkitt, and have Brooke get to know her family—the Burkitts and the Hawkes—and strangely enough, it had come to light not long before that Deacon Hayes was actually a half-brother to the Hawkes brothers, Jaxson and Beaudry, who had married her cousins, Sammi Jo and Laurel Burkitt.

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Did that make them relations? She doubted it was something he cared about and certainly she did not. Kenzie had found him to be a man who didn't like conversation all that much. He preferred to keep his thoughts to himself and little was known about his background other than he had been in the military, where he had flown medivac helicopters in some of the worst areas in the world, and then he had come back home to open up his own air care business.

The hospital system had contracted with his company. It seemed that while he was the owner, he also flew one of the four helicopters in his fleet. So he wasn't someone who let others do the work while he sat behind a desk. He was just the lone wolf who liked his space. She could allow him to be the lone whatever he wanted because she found that she worked best with little interaction of a social kind on her shifts. That made them a good match... workwise. As long as he stayed in his cockpit and stayed out of her workspace, they would get through the assignment. Now what was he doing talking to her daughter?

"Being a sprinkle aficionado myself, I saw the long face over the strawberry cake with its plain icing and could not watch a fellow sprinkler go without. I sought out Mr. Jackson, who took pity upon us. And did I mention that she cleaned her entire dinner plate? Couldn't ignore that."

Who are you and what did you do with the hotshot pilot? That was what her mind said, but her words were simply, "Thank you. I hope my child wasn't a bother, so that you felt you had to come over to our table."

"Not a bother at all. Miss Brooke has excellent manners, and it was very nice to share desserts together. But I know I must be holding you up with the rest of your evening

plans.” He looked at the young girl finishing her last bite of cake. “Thank you, again. And for your help in where I should shop in town. I’ll remember your helpful information. Have a safe trip home, ladies.” And he left them without a look back... no nod to Kenzie, but all smiles for Brooke.

She waited until they were in the car and headed home for some blanks to be filled in.

“What brought him to the table tonight?”

“Mr. Deke? I smiled at him and waved.”

“Why in the world would you do that? He’s a stranger. What have I...”

“But you told me who he was. He’s your coworker and you fly in his helicopter together rescuing people so he can’t be a bad stranger, right? And he had Mr. Jackson bring him over to the table and he even introduced us, so you wouldn’t be upset with him talking to me. He really is funny and nice and he did get sprinkles for the cake. And did you know he has a dog named Ranger? And he flew with him in the Army too. Ranger even got a medal. He said I could meet him one day if you said it was okay. Is it? And you said that sometimes others need one of our smiles, and he looked like he was alone and a little sad, so I smiled at him.”

Seemed her daughter had found out more about Deacon Hayes in fifteen minutes than she had in all the time they had been flying assignments. And how could she fault her daughter for using her own words against her? But lonely and sad? Is that how her daughter saw him? Then another thought eased into her realization... could she be guilty of a rush to judgment?

He was quiet... that was Brooke’s description. Maybe lonely and sad. Whereas she had been quick to label him aloof and even arrogant. Perhaps a little jealous of his expertise? And she might have allowed his looks and the other females’ reaction to a

new male in their midst to shade her opinion as well. Possibly because of her experience with Brooke's father, a Casanova of renown.

It was just as well they rarely spoke of him, and that was understandable, given he had died eight months after Brooke's birth. She had never really known the man who had fathered her, since Kenzie left him two months after Brooke was born. And that was a blessing for the most part. Kenzie had to keep reminding herself that it was not nice to speak ill of the dead... but she couldn't help thinking about it. Her marriage had been the biggest mistake of her life. But the saving grace, for which she would always be thankful, was that her little girl had come from it. Together, the two of them made a family.

"Mom, can I meet his dog?" Brooke's repeated question brought Kenzie back. And she gave a standard mom response that made her wince inside as she sounded so much like her own mother in the moment. "We'll see."

Thanks, Major Deacon Hayes, for reminding her of so many less-than-pleasant moments in her life. He was just the "gift" that seemed to keep on giving. She did what she did during her assignments with him, reminding herself that the clock was ticking and, with any luck, he would be out of their lives in less than three months. She and life would return to normal routines at the hospital.

Get through two more months, and he would be a vague memory. That made her smile.

Chapter Two

"We're headed toten miles north of Fort Casey," Deke Hayes informed them as Kenzie and Jayson Green, a fellow RN, fell into step beside him. The trio strode toward the helipad where their "ride" awaited them. Air Ambulance Delta 380, a tricked-out, fully loaded medical flying machine with bright-red and gold striping on

white, had already bought patients time and a few miracles since its inception at the hospital two months before.

Kenzie and the two others on the crew were dressed in the bright-red jumpsuits with the white helmets with red and gold medical insignias on the sides. The bright color made them stand out on the ground in the midst of a chaotic situation. The multiple zippered pockets held a multitude of necessary medical supplies, keeping them at her fingertips and, as Deke Hayes adjusted the helmet's microphone from the pilot seat, she ran over her own checklist of items and strapped herself into the jump seat in the back. Jayson took the copilot seat up front. With expert ease, the craft lifted upward and then arced toward the southwest. They would only be in the air fifteen to twenty minutes, thanks to the engaged jet engines.

“Three injured.” Deke's deep tones came through her earpiece. “The driver of the semi loaded with farm machinery is headed to a local hospital. The car's driver was also DOA. The other passenger is ours if she is still viable when we get there. We'll need our A game.”

A game. It was going to take that and then some, Kenzie thought, judging just on the carnage of vehicles they could see from the air. When they touched down, she and Jayson were out of the craft and running. Deke moved to open the bay door of the craft and prepare to receive the stretcher if Kenzie and Jayson made a positive assessment to retrieve the injured patient and moved to transport. Once on-site, Kenzie went into a routine that was automatic for her—vitals, assessing injuries and severity, viability for transfer. The victim was a young female, possibly early twenties. She had very severe injuries.

The state trooper in charge of the scene shared the little bit of information they had as she and Jayson rose, motioning to Deke that they were going to transport. Less than five minutes later, they were in the air and Deke gave it full throttle. The race with the clock was on.

The voices in Kenzie's head, literally the ones coming through the speaker in her head from the trauma team awaiting their arrival, were giving instructions and her hands were on auto in the cramped space. The victim hadn't regained consciousness since the accident and it was just as well, given the dire circumstances. They landed and were met by the trauma team on the tarmac. Deke motioned that he would take over. "Your shift is over. You've got a child waiting on you, so I've got it. Go ahead with your end-of-shift duties." He fell into her place as she stepped aside. Kenzie moved on to taking care of restocking the chopper before she left, and Jayson secured the craft.

Checking her wristwatch some twenty minutes later, Kenzie shook her head. She was tired, more so after the last call. But Brooke waited, and that brought back her ability to smile. A treat might be nice to take along. She ended up in the cafeteria, eyeing the desserts. She found what she wanted and as the line person was boxing up her order to go, her gaze landed on a solitary figure at the table in the corner. A sudden urge hit her out of the blue. Before she could talk herself out of it, she spoke to the server once more, adding to her order. She tamped down the urge to keep walking out the door and headed toward the table.

Without preamble, when those eyes looked up at hers, she simply set the small plate down next to the coffee cup in front of the man. His gaze fell to the offering and then she caught a slight upturn at the corner of his mouth. It didn't quite reach his tired eyes, but it wasn't a rejection. "You looked like some sprinkles might be called for. Consider this a gift from Brooke."

He nodded. "You've got a good kid there. Give her my thanks."

The silence amplified. "I'll tell her." She paused before turning away. "I hope we were able to make it here in time on the last flight."

The light was definitely off in the gaze he turned on her. "Time wasn't on our side.

And certainly not on hers.”

“I heard one of the troopers on-site mention alcohol was found. I suppose this will be yet another senseless drunk driver... the truck driver, who probably survived.”

He shook his head. “Not this time. It was the driver of the car, her husband... she had dug him out of the beer joint just up the road from the crash. He argued and won the seat behind the wheel.”

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“So now two people are gone. Senseless.”

“No... make that three. Seems she was expecting their first child... two months along. Senseless and tragic.” His gaze went back to the sprinkles, which now seemed a jarring note.

“You deserve some rest. I’ll let you get on your way and I’ll get home to Brooke.”

“Be careful out there. And give an extra hug to my sprinkles buddy. You can’t have too many of those.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

And it stayed in her mind all the way to Jackie’s house, and the hug might have been extra tight and a mite longer, so that Brooke had to wiggle and remind her that it was okay to let go. She smiled, but the image of Deke’s lone figure sitting at that table earlier would remain in the back of her mind for the rest of the evening, no matter how she tried to dislodge it.

It was strange, and even appeared in a dream that night, which woke her in the early morning hours and refused to allow her to sleep again. The man was an enigma, and one she didn’t need lurking in her dreams.

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Was he crazy to be thinking about putting roots down in Burkitt, Texas? Or was he crazy to want to do it at all? His life had been textbook nomadic for as far back as he

could recall. His father had dragged them around to a dozen bases before he bought his grave and stopped moving. That had left him and his mother to continue the moving until she took up with a truck driver that had no need for a teenager. His father had another family in the top half of Texas. But they wouldn't be too welcoming of someone like him whose mother took away their father. Two years of odd jobs in deep south Texas, and he'd done the unthinkable. He'd enlisted and that was that. He had an aptitude that came in handy and made him valuable. When the time came for reenlistment, where else did he have to go? No family called him. No hometown awaited.

He had received specialized training and found he was quite good at it. He became a medic and then a full-fledged trauma specialist. And he was good at gaining the confidence of those who were enemies. So he flew helicopters and made "friends." All under orders of the military.

And then he made a mistake. He believed he could become like everyone else. He had met a woman. And he asked her to marry him after he returned from his deployment. She had been thrilled to think of all the exotic places they would be stationed. All seemed to be fine until he told her during a phone call that he had decided to not reenlist, but to have them live in Texas and open a business with his helicopters. It would be a good life, and one where they could easily have a family and a home in one place.

She went quiet for a couple of weeks. He worried something had happened, and then he received the brief letter. Basically, she wanted to see the world, and as the wife of a senior officer, which she fully intended him to become. It was clear he couldn't provide that any longer. Neither did she plan to settle down in a one-horse town in Texas. And she was seeing someone who could do better... a lawyer in her uncle's firm. That was that. The perfect family life he thought might be in the cards evaporated. Given his family history, and the fact he evidently was a rotten judge of women, he shoved all such ideas out of his brain. He had been branded with the call

sign, Lone Wolf, and he might as well live up to it. He did not look back, and he did not look too far ahead. The present was enough.

“I’m really glad you like this place,” the woman named Jackie was saying. She had just shown him the property he was purchasing to be his home in Burkitt, and then, when he returned to his base of operations, the person he would place in charge of the helo service in this area would have it as part of the hiring package. His focus returned to her. “It needs a lot of work here and there. Some tender loving care inside it... but it was a good place to grow up and it just needs that ‘TLC’ of a family inside it again.”

“Well...” He smiled. “I don’t have that family, other than myself and my dog, but I know what you mean. I’m sure you have good memories of growing up in it. I will do my best to bring it back to what it can be.” And in doing so, bring himself back... or at least as far as he could. But he didn’t add that to the conversation.

They shook hands and the keys rested in his palm. Jackie slid behind the wheel of her car but did not pull away. She stuck her head closer to the open window. “Well, you know where I and my family live, just a mile to the left of you. And Kenzie and her daughter live in the opposite direction about a quarter mile to the west. The old peach orchard lies between you two. The land across from you, and surrounding us all, is part of the Aces High Ranch, so it definitely is a peaceful neighborhood. Welcome!” She gave a final lift of her hand in farewell, drove away, and then quiet settled around him.

A peaceful neighborhood. “That’s what we need, isn’t it, Ranger? No sounds of vehicles, planes... tragedy. Just peace for the soul. And you’re in charge of the perimeter, so don’t think you’ll lounge on that big porch and get soft.” Deke smiled at the dog at his side, his massive head turned at an angle, seeming to take in his every word. And Deke had known him long enough to believe he could do just that. “Yep, just us two old soldiers. Time to see if this Texas dirt will let us put down those roots

for a while... we won't push our luck and look for it to be permanent."

He and the dog headed toward that porch and the front door to their new temporary home. It was time to open another chapter in their travels.

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"Why are we sounding an alarm? And so early?" Deke came through the underbrush and stepped into the opening in the rock-rimmed orchard, where a rusted gate hung from one hinge and slowly moved at the whim of the breeze. Ranger had barked at the top of his lungs for several minutes, which had finally caused Deke to abandon his mug of coffee on the porch railing and come in search of the animal.

There were about twenty peach trees in various stages of abandonment within the rock-walled orchard. Standing next to the animal, he finally got him to hush. But he had no clue what had caused the ruckus. "What set you off? A rabbit? Maybe a squirrel?"

There was an odd sound. Had he imagined it? Ranger raised from his seated position, his ears at attention and his gaze raised upward. Deke's gaze followed and surprise held him as he spied a splash of yellow tee shirt and green shorts perched on one of the sturdier lower branches. It was the last thing he'd expected to see. Then he spied two long black braids and a familiar, impish face with a hand over its mouth, trying to smother another giggle.

"I spy a sprinkle princess aloft in this enchanted orchard. I wonder what brings her to this tree so early on a Saturday morning? Does your mother know you like to view the world from such lofty places?"

"Yes, unfortunately, her mother does know her propensity for such things, and I thought we had established a 'no fly' rule once and for all. Sorry, I got here as fast as

I could. Luckily, I was having my morning coffee on the porch and heard the alarm sounding, thanks to your watchdog.” Kenzie came to stand not far from the man and his dog, her gaze joining theirs skyward. “Brookelynn Sarafina Calhoun, get down from that tree this instant.”

“Yes, Mama. But I can’t. The branch I used to climb up here broke off when I tried to climb back down. That’s why I was sitting up here so long and then the dog found me and started barking, so I just sat here waiting for help to come.”

“That is a problem,” Deke spoke up. He moved a couple of feet and got a better look at the situation. “Okay, so here is what you’re going to do. I want you to reach up slowly, keeping your seat on the branch. Can you get a good grip on that branch just above your head and a little to the front?”

Brooke slowly raised one arm and then the other. She nodded.

“Good girl. When I count to three, you are going to slide off the branch you are sitting on and keep your grip tight on the other branch. You hang on tight and I will be able to reach up and grab your legs. Then when I say let go, you’ll let go of the branch above you, and I’ve got you. It will be easy. And your mom is right here next to me, so she can catch us both if needed.”

That produced another giggle. Kenzie wasn’t laughing. She moved closer, unsure of just how she’d be of any help if something went wrong with this idea. But she followed his instructions to her, standing toe-to-toe with him, her arms ready to raise upward at his signal.

“Ok, when I say ‘three,’ you will let go of the branch, my hands will have your legs, and you will then reach down and grab my shoulders, and we will ease you to the ground. Got that?”

“Got it.”

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“Okay, good girl. Here we go... one, two, three.” Brooke let go, and Deke’s hands and then arms had her slender body as she latched onto his shoulders. With a turn, he gently loosened his grip to allow the child’s feet to make contact with the ground.

Kenzie released a breath and then took another steadying breath or two. “Thank heavens, Brooke. You added another year to my age. What is it you don’t understand when I say you are to stay out of trees and keep your feet on the ground? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, Mama. And I scratched my arm on the branch before you came. It’s bleeding.” She held up her bare arm for her show-and-tell.

“I see that. And I see blood on your leg too.” The trio looked down at the limb in question.

Brooke shook her head. “It’s not mine. It’s Mr. Deke’s. See?” She pointed at the deep scratch on the man’s forearm.

“It’s okay,” he spoke up. “I felt the buckle of her sandal catch me as she slid downward. No big harm done.”

“I’m so sorry! We need to put the stingy stuff on it and a Band-Aid. Right, Mama? It could get infected if we don’t. That’s always what we have to do when I get hurt. Come on... I’ll show you our house.” She reached over and took his hand in hers. “We have a first aid kit with lots of Band-Aids and stuff that stings.”

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Wait. Our house? Her daughter's words mixed with observations her brain was currently making. Kenzie watched this interlude between the child and man and was caught again by the transformation in the man across from her. She noted the way the smile spread, infusing solemn features with a gentle warmth. Fine crinkle lines appeared to fan out from the outer corners of his deep cobalt-blue eyes, with long dark lashes that fanned across high cheekbones beneath the tanned golden-brown skin of a man who had a habit of being in the outdoors. The bright morning sun picked out the highlighted blond strands in the thick mahogany browns that were worn longer to curl upward just above his shoulders in back. What was this about?

"Mama, he's bleeding. We need to clean it and put a bandage. That's what you always say must be done when there's blood. And then we can have pancakes, because that makes everyone feel better."

"Does your mother always say that too? About the pancakes?" Deke was looking at Brooke with a grin having replaced the smile. "But your mom has the day off today, so I think she doesn't need to deal with two patients. I think I can scrounge up a Band-Aid at my house."

"But you don't have pancakes with faces on them, I bet. And that makes you feel much better. Right, Mama?"

Her daughter was clearly not going to let the idea go. Best to get it over and done. She put a smile on her face. "It does, indeed. So it looks like I have two patients and a batch of pancakes to whip up."

"Can I meet your dog, Mr. Deke? You said I might when we ate sprinkles at the cafeteria at the hospital."

"You can do just that." He made a hand signal and the large dog moved to stand at his side. Deke bent down on one knee, his hand rubbing along the dog's back. "Miss

Brooke, this is Ranger. He's a Belgian Malinois, and we served together in the Army. We were lucky enough to retire together. He might look ferocious, and if you were a bad guy, then you'd need to be afraid of him. But he is a pushover to his friends. You can rub your hand along his back, like I'm doing right now. Want to try it?"

She nodded quickly. Very gently she did as she saw Deke doing, and her smile was huge. "Look, Mama, I think he likes me. We're going to be friends. He's so soft."

"Well, one step at a time. And we need to get moving and get the injured taken care of and brunch moving along. Lead the way."

Chapter Three

"Sorry, I have a feeling you had other plans for your Saturday morning other than having to host me and my dog." His words were low between him and Kenzie as she stood at the island stove, heating the grill to the perfect temperature for the pancake batter. He sat on the tall stool across from her, elbows on the granite top, watching her move about the kitchen.

"I didn't have plans to find my daughter dangling from one of those old peach trees. And I'm just glad that your dog alerted me to her whereabouts, and doubly glad that you were there to reach up high enough to get her down without anything being broken. I don't know what I'm to do with her to keep her feet on the ground. It seems since she could walk, she has to be climbing on top of things, swinging the highest on the playground, generally giving me more and more gray hairs in the meantime. Offering pancakes is a simple enough 'thank-you,' and I'm glad to do it."

"Well, I appreciate home-cooked meals whenever and wherever. And Ranger seems to be enjoying all the attention he's getting too." Deke nodded in the direction where Brooke sat cross-legged on the floor in the den area, and Ranger had laid down beside her, both intent on the cartoons on the television. Brooke was absently gently

scratching behind the dog's ears and the animal was almost smiling.

"Brooke is in Heaven right now, having a dog to spend time with. It's a request that has begun showing up on her gift lists for birthdays and holidays. I'm sure there will be renewed campaigning on her part after today."

"I should apologize again in that case. But I wouldn't be very sincere. I think children gain a lot from having animal companions."

Kenzie began to ladle the pancakes onto the now-heated grill. "Let me guess... they teach responsibility."

He nodded. "Yes, there is that. But the right pet can also teach them to be decent human beings... caring, compassionate. And they teach the benefits of trust and a lifelong friendship. An added plus would be protection and peace of mind... that last would be for you."

"Pets can also be expensive. If I were to say yes, I would have to have that consideration... food, vet bills, even fencing. Who would look after the animal when I have to pull long shifts? Our lifestyle right now isn't conducive to taking care of a pet." She looked over at her daughter. "Brooke, please go wash your hands and get ready for your food."

"Okay, Mama," she responded. "Come on, Ranger. You can see my room." The pair headed down the hallway.

"What can I do?" He stood from the counter stool, ready to be put to work.

"Well, we aren't fancy around here. If you look in the cabinet beside the kitchen table, you'll find place mats, and the silverware is in the next drawer. You have your coffee, and I'll just pour a cup for me, and Brooke will have a small glass of orange

juice. I'll plate the cakes from here and that leaves the butter and syrups."

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Deke followed her instructions and had the table set in a short time. Then he found the cabinet with the glasses and mugs and took care of the juice and coffee.

Kenzie clearly noted it. Especially that he had set her mug of coffee next to her spot along with the sugar bowl. She smiled across at him as she retrieved the butter dish and syrup containers, setting them on the table. He saw her nod. "I've noted a time or two in the break room that you seem to prefer your coffee with sugar only. Pilots do have to be observant."

"I see. Thank you. I normally don't expect a guest to work for their meal."

"I had a very kind lady who lived next door to us for a couple of years and would keep an eye out for me when one or both of my parents were not into doing that. Any manners I have come courtesy of her due diligence on that score." He stepped over to take the plates with food from her, adding them to the center of the table. He noted where she indicated her chair was and then he pulled it out, waiting for her to take the seat.

"Thank you," she said, and the smile had grown a bit. "This is indeed a treat. I can't remember ever having a guest hold my chair for me. Your neighbor should be proud."

"Well, I hope I made her proud a few times before she left this world. She deserves a throne where she is now for putting up with a ten-year-old juvenile delinquent poster child."

She looked like she was about to respond with a comment on what he had just said,

but Brooke and Ranger came back to rejoin them. After that, attention was on the food before them.

“Mama,” Brooke said after a few minutes, “Ranger has the best manners ever. I told him to wait while I washed my hands and all, and he did. He sat right beside me. And he didn’t come into my room until I told him it was okay.”

“Really? Very impressive. Perhaps some of his good manners might help you to remember yours, and elbows off the table, young lady.”

“Oops! I forgot. Sorry.” She turned her attention to Deke. “How old is Ranger?”

Deke had to think backward a bit. “He was three in dog years when he began his training for our unit. We worked together for four years. So he is seven years old, as most would count it. But in dog years, it makes him about forty-nine.”

“Wow, he doesn’t seem so old.”

“Well, he doesn’t act like it, that’s for certain.”

“So he had to retire from the Army?” Kenzie joined in with her question.

Deke shook his head, then took a thoughtful sip of his coffee before making a reply. “He didn’t retire because he was old. Ranger was retired because he had been wounded and, just like me, we had reached our end of service to the military. So they sent us both home. I was lucky enough to have been in a position that carried some weight behind my request to have him spend his remaining years with me. Anyway, it’s time Ranger and I get on our way. We have some things to do today. But I do thank you, Ms. Brooke, for sharing your box of puppy paw-print bandages and the medicated cream. You have the makings of being a great nurse, just like your mother.”

“Maybe Ranger can come over and play sometime. If he gets bored or you need someone to watch him or something,” Brooke said and gave a hopeful smile, pouring on an extra dose of charm from those eloquent eyes as she looked up at Deacon from where she was on bent knees beside the dog, giving extra ear rubs.

“I’ll keep that kind offer in mind. You have a good day and maybe give up climbing trees for a while? Or perhaps find a safer tree house or something like that.” He added the last with a grin and a wink. He looked over at Kenzie, and the grin changed to a smile, plus a little more. Then a dawning thought hit her. Perhaps he had his own barrier? One that he might be loosening? “Thanks again for the meal. I’ll see you at the office on Monday.” Then he gave a hand signal, and Ranger fell into step beside him as they headed down the path in the direction of the orchard. Kenzie was left to reevaluate some of those preconceived notions.

She realized that the man had spoken more words in the last couple of hours than in all of their previous times together. And something also told her that there might be more layers to him than the arrogant flyboy she first pegged him as. But then she wasn’t the best judge of males, as past experience would vouch for. Yet the way he spoke to Brooke, and the way he behaved with his dog and wanting to take care of him for life, indicated there was a soft spot possibly close to where a heart might be located. That certainly placed him in a different category than her ex. And he had complimented her as he spoke to Brooke. It caught her off guard.

It was just something to say to her daughter, to be nice. That’s what made him say it. Then she caught herself. Kenzie realized the old habit she had developed with her husband had reared its head. His words had always rung hollow and were generally meant to cover up some trouble that he was about to bring to their doorstep or to present a false persona to someone he needed to impress, that he was such a fine family man. She had had to put on a fake smile and add an adoring nod to keep the peace too many times. But Deacon Hayes didn’t have an agenda that she could imagine, and he sounded truly sincere. Either way, she had some reconsidering to do

where this pilot was concerned.

Chapter Four

“Well, it’s goodyou could make it over to join us for this family get-together. Sammi Jo’s gone all out, planning today for the better part of a year now,” Beaudry commented, shaking Deacon’s hand as he stepped through the doorway into the main house of the Aces High Ranch. Deacon couldn’t help gazing around the heavily carved mahogany of the massive staircase and the wide marble and wood floors of the entryway and onward down the hallway that ran deeper into the first floor of the three-story, couple of centuries-old cattle baron’s mansion.

“People who’ve lived here all their lives tend to not notice the effect it might have on others who haven’t,” Beaudry continued. “But it’s a home that’s known quite a bit of history... good and bad... and survived. Each generation has added to it, so who knows what it will look like when our children inherit it? But at least it will be here for that to happen, while so many other ranches have been sold off at auction and lost for good.”

“And now that you’ve had Burkitt History 101, according to big brother here,” Jaxson began, motioning Deacon to come into the large room to the right of the entry, which he assumed was a den area, full of more wood, high ceilings, and heavy leather furnishings. A massive landscape painting hung over the dormant fireplace. “Take a load off and have a cold beverage.” Jaxson handed over one of the two bottles he had in his hands. Deacon accepted it with a smile. The three men chose their chairs and settled in, clearly each trying to feel their way along an unfamiliar path.

“I’m glad we could have a bit of time before the festivities really get underway and the other guests arrive to try to reconnect on some level.” Beaudry took the matter in hand as was his usual straightforward path. Jaxson was content to take it at a slower pace and trust his silent regard to read more from the person across from him.

“It goes without saying, which really means we need to say it again,” Beaudry carried forward. “We owe you. For what you did for our families... for our wives and children. You went where others wouldn’t and brought them out safe and sound, and we are here to celebrate another birthday and give thanks that you also have come back to your Texas roots as an added plus. We really thought something happened to you when we lost touch and then met walls of silence from the military over the years.”

“Forgive Beaudry,” Jaxson finally spoke up. “He tends to be the one of us who got the most gift for gab. I’m sure you have your reasons for going silent all those years. You had another life than we did here. The bottom line is that you’re here now, you’re blood, and that says it all. The rest is up to you. We’ve learned the value of family that we didn’t necessarily have growing up, but we were blessed to have found life partners that civilized us a bit.”

“I’d say that there was some gap there, too, but I guess we just want to catch up with whatever you might want to share with us.” Beaudry put the period on what the brothers were trying to say.

Deacon took a long draw from his drink, marshaling thoughts and feelings that were definitely new for him to have. But he liked the direct route that he seemed to share with the two men in the room. “We grew up in totally different situations. Guess that formed us in a certain way. Sounds like you both had changes that were positive in your lives... building families and all.” He paused and gave some consideration to what came next.

“We share a mother. I’m sorry that she left you in the way she did. For most of my life, I would say that I always figured that you might harbor some resentment toward me in a weird sort of way. I’m not sure if you want to even hear mention of her, but she always spoke of you both with a mixture of pride and sadness. I know that she didn’t have it easy with my father. Then he died... too much into his liquor bottles.

And then she took up with another man that wasn't much better.

“I took off to the military as soon as I could because I didn't see any other options open to me. Fortunately, or not, I seemed to have an aptitude for the jobs they had me do. It could have been a career gig for me, but things went south on an assignment one day and I was lucky to survive. But my usefulness was curtailed, and so I used my training to get into civilian air evac. And then I parlayed that, along with an investor from the old days before the military, into a fleet of copters. Besides air evac, which we began with, we branched out into working with ranchers in being wranglers in the sky, helping move herds, survey animals, hunt predators, you name it.”

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“What I’m reading between the lines,” Jaxson said, “is that you raised yourself, determined a course for yourself, took the harder road, and rode it out like any Texas cowboy might. That’s more than okay in my book for anyone. We have the same blood in our veins. Our history will always be the same. I’m glad you’re here in Burkitt finally. Let’s get on with it.”

“I agree with Jaxson,” Laurel chimed in, stepping through the doorway. “And that leads me to remind you all that there is a party beginning outside on the patios. We would love to have you all join the rest of us.”

“And we have our marching orders, gentlemen.” Jaxson grinned, standing, the other two following his lead. He stuck out his hand to Deacon, his gaze sincere on his stepbrother. “Welcome home to Burkitt, the Aces High, and the Hawkes’s homestead.” Beaudry stepped up and did the handshake next and added a good pat on the back.

“And I’ll just apologize now for anything Jaxson might do or say in the future that might take some patience on your part. We’ve learned to ignore him often.”

“Hey,” Jaxson responded. “He’ll figure out soon enough the true brains of the operation.” Then he paused and grinned. “Our wives have the brains. Let’s go find some food.”

Chapter Five

Deke felt aload had lifted. Maybe he hadn’t been aware it was weighing him down since his return to Burkitt and finding himself face-to-face with his half brothers

when the emergency first occurred. Beaudry's wife going into labor and having a flood and storms made the need for a rescue come into play. He had done nothing that he wouldn't have done for anyone else in peril... even before he realized the identities and that he had a personal connection.

He hadn't expected to be welcomed back with such openness. But then, his mother and her bitterness toward her first husband, father to Beaudry and Jaxson, might have colored his single viewpoint. Any preconceived notions needed to be set aside and a clean slate would be good. And his brain flashed back to how the morning had begun with Kenzie and Brooke. Pancakes with faces on a lazy Saturday morning... that was alien territory to him, but it felt really nice. Not that he expected it to ever happen again, but the fact it had once and he had found it oddly comforting, was something he wouldn't forget. And as he stepped out onto the patio, he heard a familiar voice call to him.

"Mister Deke! Watch me! I'm going to do a cannonball! Watch my splash." Across from where he stood was the small figure of a little girl in a hot-pink swimsuit with sparkles sprinkled over it. He grinned and returned her wave. She stood at one end of the diving board... the lower board and not the high diving one that the older kids and adults used. With a running start, she went off the end of the board and into the pool. She came to the surface quickly and dog-paddled to the edge where Deke had moved. He clapped for her. She stood up in the shallows, wiping the hair from her eyes. "Did you see me?"

"I did indeed, and it was a huge splash. Well done!"

"I want to go off the big diving board, but my mom said I wasn't ready. I can do an even bigger splash that way. But I want to learn to dive. Do you know how to dive? And did you bring Ranger?"

"Yes, I do know how to dive. And Ranger is relaxing and pretending to guard the

house while I'm gone."

"Let the poor man enjoy the party, Brooke. Your friends are waiting for you to dry off and get ready to eat, so that the birthday cake can be cut. Run, get your towel." Kenzie had seen her daughter show off for the tall man and then realized that she should have known he would be invited to the same party that afternoon as they were. After all, he was a Hawkes's stepbrother.

While her daughter dashed off to join her friends, Kenzie was left standing beside her coworker. "I'm sorry. Brooke can be quite talkative to those she likes. Feel free to speak up and..."

"No, no... she is fine. Quite refreshing. And I know that I need to work on being more vocal, practice my conversational skills. That way, people won't think I'm aloof and unapproachable." He returned her gaze, and she knew without a doubt that he had heard her characterization of him with the other members of her staff and he had waited for the perfect moment to let her know. No use but to own it.

"I suppose those are easy labels to use when a person doesn't really know the other person. It was obviously a mistake and colored by other things that had no bearing to you. I'm sorry that I was that shallow a person. I know better."

For a few long seconds, he stood before her in silent consideration. Then he held out his hand. "Hello, I'm Deacon Hayes, lead pilot on the evac team. And you are?"

She felt a smile escape even as she tried to be at her sincere best. Her hand went inside his. "Hello, I'm your trauma evac flight nurse, Kenzie Calhoun. Nice to meet you at last."

"Hope I'm not interrupting, but we're going to have the kids gather for photos with Lacy and then she can blow out the candles. You said you didn't want to miss out on

that photo.” Laurel might have considered the fact that they were shaking hands a bit odd, but she said nothing. And she certainly didn’t mention the fact that neither had released the grip. Her smile just grew as she turned away.

At the same moment, they both dropped the handshake. Was that as weird as it seemed? Or was it something else? Deke’s smile faded.

“I need to catch some photos. Have fun.” Kenzie couldn’t seem to make her getaway fast enough. Had he scared her off by holding her hand too long? He was a bit rusty in interactions with the opposite sex. He had blocked off that part of his life while he was getting out of the military and working to establish his own aero business. He had been told that time would heal all wounds, physical and psychological. Deke had hoped that would be the case. And then he had channeled energy into saving his partner, Ranger, and getting permission to bring him back to the States with him. He had simply made up his mind that his singular path was probably the way it was best.

Deke’s attention was captured by a tall man stepping forward to join him on the patio.

“I have to say that when I was told that there was a third component in the Hawkes’s bloodline, I was speechless... and a little frightened. To think there was another one out there like Beau and Jaxson in the world. But then I held out some hope that there still might be a chance that the third time would be a charm, and you just might be the pick of the litter, so to speak.” The man voicing those words offered them with a wide grin and his hand. “I’m sure your brothers have mentioned their best and most brilliant friend, Matthew Matteo. We’ve been buddies since grade-school days. Welcome to Burkitt.”

Deke accepted the handshake. “Seems they might have forgotten to mention you, but it’s good to meet you now.”

“Well, I had planned to call you later in the week, but this is even better in person.

I'm an attorney and there are some documents in your name from Thomas Hawkes's will. I searched for you after his death, but it seems you and your mom were well off the grid for a while. My letters came back each time. Then, word did come a few years back that your mother had died in a wreck in Georgia. But they knew nothing about you and your whereabouts. If you call my office on Monday, I'll set up a time that we can look over those papers. You look a little shocked by that fact."

"I'm shocked that my mother's ex-husband even thought of me at all. Why would he have done that?"

"Regardless of how things ended between him and your mother, I can tell you that when she left him and the boys behind, she took his heart. He never got over her. And when he heard about you... well, he knew the importance of a connection that Beau and Jaxson would want to have with a half brother... the fact they would know that someplace out there, they had a half brother. He was a good man."

"I'm beginning to see there was a lot my mother left out when she would take off on a rant about the life she left behind her. How hard it was and how her husband had no ambition. I figured out after a while that her version might not be exactly truthful. And I've seen the hard work he had to have put into the Hawkes's Ranch over the years to build it up and turn it over to Beaudry and Jaxson. But the past is done. I've learned it's a waste of time to look behind you." He offered his hand again.

"Well, I'll look forward to talking to you next week. Now I think I see some pretty ladies by the pool that need my attention. Enjoy! The Burkitt parties are always the best."

Deke had to agree with that assessment as time progressed and both Hawkes brothers made certain to introduce him to the townspeople and ranch hands in attendance. Some were surprised by his relationship to Beaudry and Jaxson, while others took it as old news. All were welcoming, and he was both overwhelmed by their invites to

join this or that or just drop by for coffee here or there. And he realized that there were a few females that weren't giving their attention all to Matt Matteo. He was a bit uncomfortable with that. Especially since he had caught Kenzie looking a time or two in his direction, and he could almost feel a certain chill in the air as she watched a female or two do their best to flirt. He wasn't interested in their efforts, but he somehow doubted it mattered to his neighbor. It was time for him to take his leave.

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Brooke saw him shake hands with his hosts and hostesses, and she made a fast move to intercept him at the gate to the patio. “Why are you leaving? You didn’t go swimming. I was hoping you could show me how to dive.”

“Really? I didn’t know we had discussed that.”

“Well, I thought we might. You know that we can use the pool here anytime. My mom is related to the Burkitts, and now you’re related to the Hawkes, too, so that makes us all kinda family, right? So we could come swimming here when you aren’t busy and you could teach me, maybe?”

He shook his head. Those huge violet eyes were truly going to be killers as she grew older. In the meantime, they made it very difficult to turn down her wistful plea.

“Did I hear correctly?” Kenzie had joined them on the sidewalk and evidently had heard part of the conversation. She looked directly at her daughter, who managed to try for innocence on her face. “And you can save time and come clean with it, young lady.”

“We’re talking about Mr. Deke teaching me how to dive so I can be like the bigger kids. I can do it. I know I can.” Those eyes turned in his direction again.

“I did mention I could dive earlier after I first arrived.”

Kenzie, hands on hips, turned her gaze on him. “But I am thinking that was the basic conversation and my daughter has embellished it to her benefit. And put you on the spot, which she will apologize for right now.” She looked back at Brooke.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I’m sorry, Mr. Deke.”

“Apology accepted. But I’d like to speak to your mom for a moment, okay?”

Brooke nodded quickly, then walked slowly back toward the party area. When she was out of earshot, he spoke again.

“There’s no harm done. In fact, if you don’t have any objections, I would be willing to give her some help with her diving. I saw a pool in town that we could meet at, and it shouldn’t take too long to teach her.”

Kenzie looked surprised... and hesitant. “You truly were placed on the spot by a master manipulator. I know the routine too well. She’ll live without diving lessons.”

“Unless you have a problem with me, personally, teaching her, then I truly am being honest when I say it would be my pleasure to help her out. I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it.”

“Well, finding time will be the key to this working. I’d have to check the schedule that my supervisor maps out and all. He can be strict.”

She had him. And that cute little half dimple was betraying the fact that she was joking at his expense. When did he ever notice cute dimples? He cleared his throat that had gone dry for some reason.

“I think he can be reasonable in certain situations.”

“We’ll see,” she replied. “And we can use this pool... less crowded and closer to our homes. We can see how the schedule works for each of us next week. And thank you. This will make her very happy.”

“That’s the goal.”

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“If I didn’t know better, I’d probably have a bruised ego or something. You look like this is us having some sort of clandestine assignation in the back of a bar. When, in fact, this is two coworkers at a table, albeit in the farthest corner of the hospital cafeteria, at an hour when most people are either gone or beginning their shifts for the evening. I’d take it personally that you have a thing about being seen in my company, but then I’d just be paranoid... correct?”

Hit the nail on the head. But she wouldn’t give that answer. “I chose a quiet spot where perhaps we will have five uninterrupted minutes in order to plan out these diving lessons. I didn’t think being in the office with people coming and going would be the best. I wouldn’t have figured you for a person to have such an active imagination.”

“Most people don’t. Suppose I’ve gotten complacent behind the silent façade. Although I do talk a good deal with Ranger. He and I have similar viewpoints most of the time.”

“You mean he doesn’t ever disagree or talk back to you. The perfect companion, in your estimation?”

His gaze fell to his coffee cup. Why did she think she had said something that wasn’t taken as lightheartedly as she’d meant it to be? He was such an enigma at times. Perhaps something in his past? Sometimes she tended to forget that he had spent a good deal of time in the military, and there was some secrecy attached to some of it. She wished she had listened when other members of the staff had been sharing gossip, although that wasn’t a usual habit of hers.

Still, it might give her an insight into this man. But then, why should she take that time? Her service rotation was brief... another couple of months and then Dr. Damien would ask her preference for a more permanent placement. But there was something that made her wish she knew what was really going on sometimes behind those deep-blue eyes. Eyes that reminded her of the deep depths of the swimming hole where she grew up and spent so many happy, carefree hours... until she made a bad choice and things changed. And that was where her thoughts stopped. The matter at hand involved swimming... her daughter's and not hers.

“It would seem that perhaps a Thursday afternoon or a Sunday evening might be the best? There are Saturday mornings and afternoons here and there, but you might prefer to use those for errands, social plans or whatever? What do you think?” She placed the decision back in his court.

“Social plans? Those would be few and far between. That's something that would be more of a concern on your part, I'm sure.”

“My part? Well, then we have no worries about conflicts on either of our social calendars. I can't remember the last time that I...” she replied and then caught herself... a bit too much information.

“The last time you had a date? Was that what you were going to say? I doubt that, unless your standards are a bit too high.”

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“Too high? I might expect someone to be punctual, presentable... no holes in jeans, shirt tucked in if appropriate, good hygiene, and able to put two sentences together at least once or twice in a conversation?” She paused. “Now that you mention it, that might be asking too much.”

“And of course, you have Brooke to consider,” he added it to her list. “She probably plays a big part in all of that.”

“She comes first in all of that, as you put it. She and I have built a pretty safe, comfortable space for ourselves in the last couple of years. Part of that was my deciding to leave the big city and come back to quiet Burkitt, for a safer lifestyle in a smaller community, where everyone knows each other and has for years. I used to think that was one of the reasons I wanted to move away when I could and have a ‘real life.’ But then I wanted to come back for just those same reasons. Guess I grew up. Anyway, we got off the subject at hand. Back to the schedule.”

“I suggest we begin this Thursday. Ranger and I can pick her up at three. Spend a couple of hours at the pool. Then have her back home to you. That gives you time if you need to run an errand or just go home and put your feet up. Or if you would prefer to be there and watch the lessons, then there’s that. We are in the same neighborhood, so that makes things a bit easier. And it’s nice that your cousins don’t have any problem with us using their pool.”

“Sammi Jo and Laurel are amazing. They have this enormous strength and vision in them. I admit to hero worship, but don’t spread that around. But they fought for their dreams, and even though the odds were against them, they kept fighting for the ranch and for their own vision of the future. And it’s worked. Of course, there is also the

fact they found their counterparts in the men they married. Guess you can be proud to share some of that bloodline on your side.”

Deke nodded. “I’m learning more and more about the Hawkes brothers. I get what you’re saying. They’re tough, but you have to be when you fight both Mother Nature and humans, at times, in order to protect your heritage and your family and its future. I’ve seen that in other countries, and I now see it here in this country, in Texas, involving people I know... am related to. It gives it an added reality. Granted, it isn’t bloodshed and other horrors, by any means, but I envy them the fact that they know what they have and what they don’t want to lose for their next generation.”

“True. It does change when your family is involved. I know I will continue to work to make certain Brooke has a home and a good start toward whatever and wherever her dreams take her.”

“You speak with such conviction. I’m sure you’ll do just that. But surely you know that the odds might be that you’ll find a partner who can share those goals and help with the load of raising a child and all. Perhaps have other children too. You aren’t exactly a senior citizen yet.”

Kenzie realized he was trying to be nice, trying to insert some levity. But she had learned the hard way that it was always the wisest move to keep your feet planted firmly on the ground, count only on yourself, be grateful for good things when they happened, but don’t expect them. She planned to share none of that. So she responded as he would expect... with a brief nod and slight smile. “True, I’m not over that hill just yet. But Brooke is working on pushing me toward that summit as fast as she can. Although, with you teaching her how to dive properly, maybe that will be one less gray hair.”

“And that brings us back to why we are sitting here. So we agree on say, Tuesday and Thursday and leave Saturdays open for social engagements. But Sunday afternoon is

a definite green light too. I think we have a game plan.”

“And I have the check for our drinks,” she said, taking the check in hand and standing. “The least I can do, since you are giving up your time. You have made Brooke very happy. Now I need to get a move on and pick her up at Jackie’s. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, indeed. Tomorrow is another day. Have a good evening.” He stood as she headed toward the checkout stand, paid, and then left the cafeteria. There was something about the change in her when he mentioned the future she might still have ahead of her. It was almost imperceptible, but then, he always seemed to be able to sense a change in the people he engaged with. It had been a big asset in his work in the military. He chalked that up to his job at the time. But this time, it was different. Deke needed to know more about the mother and daughter. She wasn’t a case, but she was someone who had caught his attention. Why that was, he couldn’t quite put his finger on. True, she was easy on the eyes. He amended that... because she is more than just easy. And it wasn’t just the outer beauty that was easy to see. There was an intriguing mixture of spirit and gentleness. Grace and mystery. She was the first woman in a very long while that had actually caught his attention.

Not that he was looking to have that kind of relationship, and not with a coworker. That would be just asking for headaches.

But when he thought about it, she was the grown-up version of Brooke—the same raven-black hair, sky-blue eyes with dark lashes and a darker ring around the center that gave a mysterious look, one that drew him in and made him want to search their depths. And that could get a guy in trouble too. So put the brakes on, mister.

He had a safe thing going with Ranger and his work. They weren’t dodging bullets, sleeping in caves, or eating cold rations. And his heart was mended as best as it could be. So he didn’t need to rock the boat. Swim lessons with a child... and that was all he

signed on for.

Why did it feel like he was trying to convince himself?

Chapter Six

Kenzie shook her head after the third evac of the day on Monday. The team had begun the morning running and not stopped until late afternoon. When she finally was able to sink into her chair, she released a deep sigh of welcome relief.

“It feels so good just to sit in something that isn’t vibrating and moving,” she remarked as Jayson walked into the office, both hands with drinks in them. He handed one of them over to her. She gratefully took it.

“You are a lifesaver in more ways than one today. I needed this,” she said as she took a deep draw from the straw, the sweet tea ice-cold and perfect.

“Well, I can’t take credit for it,” he responded. “I was walking past the cafeteria, and the chief was coming out of it with that drink in hand. He said he had gotten summoned to the administrator’s office and would I see that you got that. You might need it. So there you are. He’s the lifesaver in this case.”

The news surprised Kenzie. First, that Deke had thought of getting her a drink, her favorite one. And then he even knew what she liked. He truly was observant, just like with her coffee at her house. He was thoughtful. An attribute which Kenzie hadn’t been acquainted with in a male in a very long time. She hoped Jay wouldn’t read anything silly into it. Their leader was simply being nice. Change of subject.

“How’s your plan going to take some time to get down to the beach before the end of summer?” She would steer the conversation into safer waters—no pun intended.

“Fingers crossed. Two more weeks, and we are on our way. How about you? Are you going to take some time?”

“Well, I doubt we’ll be going anyplace like the beach, but I’m hoping to get the kitchen and dining room painted. Do some things that have been neglected before the cold weather hits again. That’ll be my vacation time.”

“I’m familiar with ‘honey-do’ lists with that stuff on it. My wife invented that concept, I think. Invented all the ways you can ignore that list for as long as possible, including paying my neighbor to do most of it for me.” He chuckled and Kenzie shook her head.

His pager went off and he read the message. “Looks like we’ve been given the green light to head home. Boss is stuck in a budget meeting. He’ll see us in the morning. Don’t have to tell me twice to get out of here. I’ll race you to the parking lot.”

“You win already,” she responded, standing and gathering her items. “I’ll be right behind you, but at a slower pace.”

Jay tossed a hand in a brief wave and left the office. Kenzie had one more thing to do. She took a bright Post-it Note and wrote a brief ‘Thanks a bunch for the sweet tea. It was needed. K’ She went across the hall and placed it on top of Deke’s computer screen. Then she headed home.

Brooke was in rare form when she picked her up at Jackie’s. She had been waiting on the porch when she pulled into the drive and wasted no time climbing in, waving at Jackie and the other kids. When they got home, she ran upstairs, and, when Kenzie had the mac and cheese casserole, one of Brooke’s favorites, on the table, she came down with having only been called once.

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Kenzie listened to her prayer and then watched her daughter dive into the food on her plate.

“Okay... what gives? Where is my daughter and what have you done with her?”

Brooke looked up. “That’s funny, Mama. I’m right here.”

“You ran right up to your room when we got home. What were you doing? You usually watch your favorite cartoon while I fix dinner. And you were waiting for me when I pulled up, where I usually have to tell you to get into the car two or three times before you finally make it.”

“I wanted to make sure my room was all picked up and fixed right because I won’t have time tomorrow because we’re meeting Mr. Deke for my first diving lesson tomorrow... remember?”

“I see. Yes, I do seem to recall that it is on the schedule. And it seems to have motivated you.”

Brooke nodded quickly. “I love swimming, and I can’t wait to dive like Lacy and the other big kids. I’m going to practice a lot. Do you think Mr. Deke will bring Ranger along? I feel sorry for Ranger, having to stay home when we’re having fun. I really like him. He’s so smart. You can really teach him a lot of things because dogs are really smart, and they can learn lots of things and even keep people safe too.”

“And this is you trying to persuade me into thinking about the subject of a dog coming to live with us again, isn’t it? I know that Ranger is an exceptional canine.

However, not all dogs are like him. His training took years and was done by experts in the military. Regular people like us don't have access to that level... not without lots of money." And there was that crestfallen look clouding her daughter's expressive face. Kenzie tried to present a solid front to it, but it was hard to ignore such things. But she didn't need to let Brooke know there were soft spots in her wall of determination on the subject of having a dog join their little family.

"I know how much you would love to have a pet. And when the timing is better, we'll seriously look into it. But a dog will take time and a lot of work, and we need to be better prepared for one. I promise you I haven't forgotten how much you would love to have one and, one of these days, we'll talk more about it. Deal?"

"Okay. I'll just keep asking for it in my prayers and keep thinking of what kind we should get."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Do you like Mr. Deke?"

The question came straight from left field at high speed. It was a moment or two for Kenzie to process it. She eyed her daughter. She looked innocent enough, but what was the context? "What makes you ask that question?"

"I was just thinking. He's awfully nice. And you work with him. And he really doesn't have any family... just Ranger. I bet he gets lonely sometimes. Maybe we could invite him and Ranger to come to dinner. I bet they'd like that."

"Well, that's nice of you to think of doing something like that. Maybe we'll have them come to dinner one day to thank him for your lessons."

Brooke beamed a wide smile. "That would be super!"

“So finish your dinner and you can then choose which swimsuit you plan to pack in your bag for tomorrow, along with your towel and swim shoes.”

“Don’t forget to pack your bag too. You can learn to dive with me. I bet Mr. Deke will teach you too.”

“I think I’ll watch tomorrow. I have a book I’ve been trying to read for a couple of months, so maybe I’ll do that while you work hard.”

*

“So maybe I should have rethought sitting and reading a book,” she murmured the next afternoon. The water looked very inviting. Even more so since the temperature had climbed to triple digits. She slathered sunscreen on the legs not protected by the cuffed denim shorts that fell to mid-thigh and on the arms not protected by her sleeveless eyelet shirt, the pale blue matching the wide ribbon circling the crown of her cream straw hat, the broad brim shielding her face from the harmful rays. Dark-lens sunglasses gave her a bit of license to take in Deke’s tall figure as he exited the Jeep and took out a backpack from the back seat. Ranger jumped down from the passenger seat.

“Ranger’s here, Mama!” Brooke’s enthusiasm rose a couple of decibels. She and the dog met each other halfway down the path to the pool. Deke shook his head as he approached the empty lounge chair next to Kenzie’s, set his pack on the deck beside it.

“I guess her sprinkle buddy has been relegated to number two behind the furry friend now.” He smiled as he reached up, grabbed the dark-red material of his tee shirt, and drew it over his shoulders and head. It dropped onto the chair. He bent to retrieve something from his bag. Kenzie kept what she hoped was a neutral smile on her lips as she moved her gaze to focus on the words on the first page of the book in her lap.

She couldn't help the image that came to mind just then of what her staff would have to say about a Deacon Hayes, sans shirt and in slim-fitting swim trunks, the abs rock hard, biceps rippling, and long legs replete with muscled thighs. Geez. What was she doing? Ogling a man. Like the nurses she chided for doing the same thing.

"Yes, it would seem Ranger is indeed the star now. Like me, we've been relegated to just the entourage."

That made him toss a grin in her direction. "Yes, but I might step ahead of you in line. I am the one who will be teaching her to dive, not my dog."

"I see your game plan. My money stays on the dog maintaining the top spot... sorry."

"Are we going in the water now, Mr. Deke?"

"And the lady beckons you. Brooke, come get some more sunscreen on you while Mr. Deke is doing the same." Kenzie reached inside the bag on the table and then sat up while Brooke settled on her knees in front of her, back first.

"The lotion is a little cold, Mama."

"Sorry, sweetheart. I'll hurry."

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“When you finish mine, you can help Mr. Deke put his on his back. She’s really good at it,” she assured the man seated across from them. And Kenzie managed to maintain her attention on the little body in front of her. This hot potato was in his lap.

“I’m sure she is. But I’m ready to dive in right now and be ready when you can get in the water.” He stood, and after a couple of long strides, he executed a perfect dive off the side of the pool.

“Wow, Mama, did you see that? That’s what I’m going to do.”

“One of these days, yes. But you walk before you run, okay? Listen to what Mr. Deke tells you to do.”

“Can I go now?” Her daughter stood, impatience evident.

“Okay. Be careful,” Kenzie said, putting the lotion’s lid back on the bottle.

The words barely left her mouth before there was a splash as Brooke jumped into the water and then popped up quickly, pushing off the bottom. She did her paddle-stroke combo to where Deke waited for her at the opposite side of the pool.

“She’s a happy little mermaid.” Laurel Hawkes, wife of Jaxson, had exited the house and come out onto the patio. She was dressed in shorts and a bright-colored top and her hair caught up on top of her head in a tortoiseshell clip. Moving a chair closer, she sat down with a wave to the pair in the pool. “Why aren’t you in that lovely water? It’s another scorcher today. Best place to be is in air-conditioning or a pool.”

Kenzie grinned. "I could ask you the same thing."

"I am working in lovely air-conditioning but took a quick break from my writing when I saw you all out here. I really haven't had much time to sit down and say hi to you."

"I know. Life is crazy, it seems. But it's good to have a moment now. So, how is it trying to be a movie mogul and a new wife at the same time?"

"Absolutely the best! Be careful, because my sister says that I tend to gush with happiness once you get me started. But it is the best. I don't know why I tried so hard for so long not to become a rancher's wife. That was the silly me. Now, I am happy and amazed." They shared the laughter.

"I am truly happy for you. Of course, we all knew that it was meant to be, and it just took you longer than the rest of us to figure it out."

"And I realize that. My sister and husband remind me of that often. But what of you?" Laurel's gaze swept to the far end of the pool, where Deke and Brooke were standing on the edge and he was instructing her in the proper form. Kenzie was glad they were far enough away that conversation could not be heard.

"What you see is it. Brooke is being given lessons on diving. Deke and I work together, so that is that. Besides, Brooke and I are doing well, being our own little family."

Laurel nodded but gave her a shrewd look. "Doing well. You know, I remember the days of us all growing up together. I never quite decided, between you and your sister, who was the most stubborn."

"Stubborn? Why do you think I'm being stubborn?"

“Maybe not stubborn so much as just determined. You and your sister struck out on your own destinies. Your mother turned down what would have been a major inheritance of lands when our grandfather died. Grandmother called her a stubborn mule for it.”

“I believe the term was not mule, but jackass,” Kenzie corrected. “And we might have thought the same thing. But it was her decision. She said we would be okay without any handouts from the Burkitts. And she was right. We did make it... both MaKenna and I went to college. And Mother went back to selling insurance and ended up meeting the man she would marry and move off to Florida with. I like to call it tenacity instead of stubbornness. Determination is a definite description. Brooke has the same in her—much to my horror at times.” Kenzie grinned with a shake of her head.

“Well, I’m just wanting everyone I know to be as happy as I am. You’re doing well on your own, but you could be doing even better if you would literally jump into the dating pool again. Just because you had one bad turn at a relationship doesn’t mean you aren’t a lot wiser now. And Brooke might benefit from a male influence in that little family scenario.”

“I realize you are still in that first year of marital honeymoon bliss, but I’ve had that honeymoon period before, and it was anything but bliss. But I know what you’re saying, and I do know all of you care about Brooke and me. That’s one of the reasons that made it an easier decision to come back home to Burkitt.”

“Why wasn’t it easier before?”

“My mom wasn’t here. I wasn’t sure how I would feel being back in the only home I had ever known in my life until I left for college and then got married. True, she is doing great in Florida and is living her best life, which she deserves. But it is different being there in the house without her... without MaKenna. But Brooke and I are

making it into our place now, and it's good."

"Speaking of MaKenna... have you seen her? Do you have contact with her? It seems like she just disappeared the day she left here after graduation from high school."

Kenzie took a moment, her gaze checking on the pair who were working without thought to her and Laurel. "I've seen her a handful of times. With the job she has, she's been out of the country for a while here and there. It's hard when you can't really ask a lot of questions, and she can't volunteer anything. But she does stay in touch when she can. Although it's hard to explain, she just might find herself here before too long... or at least that's what I hope. Especially during the holidays this year. But she can't make any promises."

"And it sounds like there is quite a story there, if my screenwriter radar hasn't failed me. But it also sounds like you aren't really able to share much, so we'll just cross our fingers and hope she will indeed be able to come home soon... like you did. I know that would be a true shock for Matteo. As much as he throws his playboy bravado around, I think that his heart might be wherever your sister is... and we can only hope it'll come back with her. But I've procrastinated long enough from the laptop. I'll leave you three to it. Three has a nice ring, don't you think?" She tossed in that last little bit with a huge wink and laughed at Kenzie. She threw a hand in the air toward the pair, who looked up quick enough to return it.

Kenzie shook her head. Matchmakers abounded in Burkitt and no place more so than at the Aces High. But she couldn't help but be glad that her friends and family cared so much that she and Brooke were happy now. Her brief year of marriage to the wrong man had been a nightmare in itself. It had also been a learned lesson. It had helped her realize a strength she never knew she had before then. And she made a vow to never be such a fool again. She and Brooke had made a good life and that was the way it would be for the foreseeable future.

Her gaze traveled again to the pair as the sound of their laughter lifted across the water. She hadn't seen her daughter so animated with anyone else. It was the mark of a good person that was exhibiting such patience and kindness in putting up with her exuberance... and hero worship?

Was that a good thing? Or was she just being the paranoid mom she had been accused of once or twice by her family and friends? Was that a slight pang akin to envy as she watched the pair? Couldn't be. She might have easily jumped in the pool and tried to find the patience to teach her daughter to dive herself. She had tried once before, but two stubborn females had made for a short class. And maybe there was something in the fact that the pair in the pool at the moment might be doing each other a big favor.

So, she was an adult and she had a book to read. That would be her excuse and she'd stick to it. She forced her gaze back to the page, where she found herself reading the same sentences two or three times.

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“Mama! Mama... did you see? I’m learning. Mr. Deke is really fun. I wish we had diving lessons every day. Can we invite him and Ranger to come to dinner?” Kenzie was trying to get the towel around her daughter’s squirming body. The question made her hesitate for a moment. Deke had come up and was using his towel, and Kenzie was maintaining her rate of breathing and brain waves while she was caught between the two humans... her child with a harmless question yet loaded with complications... and a male who was radiating vibes that she didn’t need to deal with.

Then she made a big mistake. Her gaze went upward and found his waiting. For a moment, she couldn’t remember the issues... nor her own name. And the one thing that did register loud and clear in her brain? He knew.

Chapter Seven

“Thanks for the thought of a home-cooked meal, little missy.” Deke drew his gaze away from the clearly blushing cheeks of the woman poised with towel in hand and landed his attention on the child. “But Ranger and I have promised we’d meet up with my half brothers tonight. And you did a great job for our first lesson. You are a very good student.”

“Did you hear that, Mama?” The child was beaming.

“I did, indeed. Thank you for being that.” She began helping Brooke pack up her bag.

“Can you and Ranger come over on Sunday after swimming?” The child wasn’t going to let the matter rest. Kenzie was about to nip it in the bud, but Deke beat her to it.

“I think your mother has to issue such an invitation to her table. And you and she can discuss it at home. Ranger and I need to hit the road.” He picked up his bag and gave a nod in Kenzie’s direction. “See you at the office.” He gave a whistle and Ranger left the soft grassy spot he had found in the shade. The pair were soon on their way.

“Okay, so we might have not thought this through as much as we should have.” Deke often had conversations with Ranger. Maybe he understood, maybe not. But somehow answers seemed to come easier that way. “Talk about timing. A woman comes along with beauty and brains, and she is on my flight crew. That’s the biggest red flag and against the rules of the company. My company. So that takes care of that. It’s a sign. Thanks for the talk. Your input was invaluable, as always.” Ranger simply yawned.

Deke took a quick shower, changed into jeans and a pullover shirt, slid on a pair of boots and he left Ranger with his food dish and orders to guard things. He was off in a flash to keep the dinner invitation.

“I hope you’re in the mood for barbeque ribs,” Laurel said with a smile as she opened the front door in answer to his knock. “Come on in. Beaudry takes over the pit duties and won’t let anyone near his ‘secret’ sauce recipe. And that’s fine by the rest of us.” She shared the rest of that as she led the way through the ranch house on the Hawkes’s land adjacent to the Aces High. They ended up in the large kitchen that took up the back portion of the first floor of the two-story structure. There was a faint smell of freshly painted wood as they had come through the long hallway, but aromatic food smells took over as they stepped into the kitchen that looked like it might be featured in the latest issues of some remodeling digest.

Sammi Jo was busy putting together a salad at the huge worktable in the center of the room. She gave him a welcoming smile. “We’re so glad you could join us this evening. I caught a glimpse of you from the office window when you arrived for the swimming lesson this afternoon over at our place. Hope you worked up an appetite.”

“I can guarantee you that I always have room for good barbeque,” Deke responded.

“And I bet you could do with a cold one too,” Laurel spoke up, handing over a bottle she pulled from one of the refrigerators in the space.

“I certainly could. Thanks.”

“We don’t stand on ceremony around here. You’re family, and you just make yourself at home. The men are out on the back porch and there’s a chair out there for you to kick back in too. And it is really great to see you and Brooke getting along so well. She’s a firecracker, that one.”

Deke took a swig of the cold brew and then nodded. “She is indeed that. Very smart little girl. It’s fun working with her.”

“You and our cousin, Kenzie, work together, correct? Or was that for just a little bit of time? When I heard all of that story, I was a little bit busy and groggy.” She laughed, as did the others in the room.

“Yes, you were a bit busy at the time giving birth to a perfect little nephew of mine,” Laurel responded.

“What I have retained from that evening was that things might have not gone so well if you hadn’t volunteered. I know,” she said, raising a palm in response to his upcoming downplay of the perilous situation of the flood that had stranded her as she went into labor and the part he played, “you made the decision when no one else could. And for that, there is a debt of gratitude I will always have for you. No matter my husband’s connection to you, I won’t forget, and I won’t mention it again since you aren’t comfortable with the hero designation. And we know you would like to escape us females and get to the back porch. Tell my husband that everything else is done, and when those prize-winning ribs are ready, so are we.”

“I will do that.” Deke smiled at the two women and took his leave through the back door. Just as described, the two men were seated in high-back cane rockers, cold beverages in hand, and the smell of beef ribs wafting across the patio and beyond as the sun was sinking in the western sky. The house sat on the crest of a hill and the view toward the west was unobstructed over miles upon miles of hills and plains, cut with arroyos and glints off stock ponds and meandering streams here and there. An ever-present cooling breeze ruffled the leaves overhead in tall pecan and oak trees. Somewhere in the distance, a horse whinnied and then, a few seconds later, an answer sounded. It was the golden hour of another perfect Texas evening.

“There he is. Take a seat. I see the ladies managed to get a cold brew in your hands.”

“Yes, Laurel did just that. And I have to say, this is an amazing spot for a house. Has this always been the Hawkes’s family home?”

Beaudry gave a brief snort and shake of his head. “It began as a lean-to in the late 1800s, with a clapboard four-stall barn and picket corral. Then a four-room cabin made it into the forties. The basic structure of this house came along about five years after Jax and I were born. That would be about two years before our shared mother left us. Over the years, we added a bit here and there, but nothing like it is now.”

Jaxson took over. “When Laurel and I married, I was living here. We debated building a new house on her Aces High land she inherited, close to her movie studios. But she wanted to take this homestead and do some work on it and make it into our home instead. It is a work in progress, but then she makes it a home and not just a house.”

“It feels like that,” Deke said. “She’s achieved her goal.”

“She’ll be happy to hear that. And you’re staying over at the old Murphy house, correct? That was home to a couple of our stock managers over the years. They

retired and moved to better climates. But it's a good structure. It's close to that orchard, right? And the Santos land is close to that, as I recall."

"That's right," Beaudry responded, having moved to check on the meat with a long fork and slathering some more sauce on the meat before closing the pit again. He reclaimed his seat. "Kenzie and Brooke have taken it on. Aunt Yvonne and her new husband have a place in Florida. It's good the house is being used again. Those were some darn good peaches, as I seem to remember. Good ice cream makers... and hot cobblers."

"I suppose that's where Kenzie and her sister grew up?" Deke made conversation, but he couldn't say he didn't have a reason behind it. But no one else needed to be aware of that. He took another drink from the bottle.

Jax nodded. "We all went to school together... along with Matteo... who I believe you met over at Aces High the other evening. Matt and MaKenna, Kenzie's sister, were expected to graduate and make a match of it. They were crazy for each other for years. But then she up and left town and no word since. Kenzie hears from her, I understand, but that's that."

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“Kenzie married and moved away also?”

Beaudry shook his head. “You’d earn no points bringing him up around her. He was a flyboy stationed in Abilene at the base. He swept her off her feet with all kinds of fancy promises, which were helium-filled lies. Lasted about a year and then he was sent over to Iraq. He stepped off the plane and then began a lifetime stint in a jail cell for trafficking in items... believe they called them ‘artifacts’ from one of their most sacred spots. Anyway, a divorce was granted, and all rights to Brooke were an added bonus. He got his sentence tossed on a technicality, and about a month later, he died in an accident in the Middle East someplace I’ve forgotten the name of. Most think it was a blessing in disguise for Kenzie. He had vowed to make her pay, as was his usual MO whenever things went bad for him... blame it on someone else sort of thing. But she had little Brooke and she had a tough time. She’s one nice lady and a great mom. But any interested males tend to not make it past the front door. She learned a lesson and put a shell around her and Brooke. It’s a pity because she deserves a lot better with a partner of good character.”

“Are we ever going to eat?” Jaxson stood up, eyeing the pit. “Wonder if we can get a pizza delivery out here?”

“Alright, hold your horses. Make yourself useful and go tell our wives the ribs are coming off the grill.”

“Make me useful,” Deke said, standing up and moving to the pit.

“Grab that platter and hold it while I load it up with the ribs. And get prepared to taste the best of the best ribs you ever had.”

“Not much bragging to be found around here. Good to know.” Deke grinned as he held the platter in place.

A half hour later, Deke expelled a sigh and pushed back into his chair. He looked at the bowls of food still to be had. And then at the crumbs on the plate where a big slice of warm apple pie had been, along with the scoop of vanilla ice cream on top of it.

“Ladies, I have to say that everything was amazing. I thank you for the work you did on this meal. The evening was most enjoyable.” He looked at the man seated at the head of the table. “And I have to admit that I have never tasted ribs as good as these... the meat was tender and juicy and melted off the bone. That sauce needs to be bottled and sold if you ever get tired of raising cattle and horses. Maybe in your spare time?”

That brought a round of laughter from the table. Beaudry grinned. “Right. I’ll look into that in my spare time.”

“I’m glad we were all able to sit down and share a meal,” Sammi Jo spoke up. “That’s one thing that I always wanted to have continued on the Aces High, and Laurel feels the same. The land will always continue, and only the people change and come and go on it. But while it’s our turn to take care of it, it will also take care of us in return. Welcome home to Texas. I hope you, in time, will see this family as yours and want to be part of the future and the history of this place. There is no place better to hang your hat.”

“My sister has taken over where our grandmother left off with the Aces High and really could have taught her a thing or two. No one has this place in her blood more than Sammi Jo... so I warn you that, give her a minute, and she’ll take hours immersing you in all the Texas history you will ever want to know, and you’ll be an expert on this land we call home.” Laurel meant it with full sincerity and a lot of love and pride evident between the two women in her tone. Together, he knew they made quite a team.

“No pressure there.” Beaudry smiled at his wife and then at Deke. “This ground is good for putting down roots. That being said, I know you’ll be meeting with Matteo in a few days. He’s a good man. But do not ever tell him that was said.”

“Amen to that,” Jaxson chimed in. “His ego is already the biggest in Texas. I’m just pleased that you decided to expand your helicopter business into this area. The hospital and the people in these far-flung areas needed it. We never knew the company we used to herd our cattle and do an air survey for us belonged under your umbrella, too. You own the company, yet you choose to fly, as well.”

“You own the ranch and the land, but you choose to be up before dawn and on the back of a horse until after sunset most days. I’m pretty sure it’s for the same reason. You do it on a horse, and I do it in the sky.”

“Can we interest you in any second helpings?” Laurel asked.

“I think I already had seconds. It would be thirds at this stage, and I am wisely backing off. It’s an early morning for me and I need to head home. I know my way around a kitchen, and I believe in eating and then cleaning it up, guest or not. If you’ll allow me to help...”

“Sorry, but the first dinner... you are our guest. The next one, we’ll toss you a drying towel,” Sammi Jo piped up with a grin. “That’s what our husbands are for, so don’t worry.” They rose from the table and with good-natured grumbling, Jaxson and Beaudry walked their newly found half sibling to the front porch.

After handshakes all around, Jaxson had the final say. “Just remember, you’re welcome here anytime. You ride?”

“I do. Not as much as I would like, but I’m thinking I might need to find a good horse now that I’m considering those roots.”

“We have a few of those around here... horses.” Jaxson grinned. “Come out anytime and we’ll get you fixed up.”

“Sounds good. See you later.”

The drive home gave him time to think back over what it might have been like if he had been brought back to this country by their mother after his father died. He could have known what it was to have siblings. To have a home with roots. His whole life might have been different. But looking back got people no place fast. His course, whatever it turned out to be, was ahead of him. But there might be some possibilities that he hadn’t expected. It was a feeling that infiltrated his brain and even a dream or two. It arrived about the same time a cupcake with sprinkles was set in front of him and he had looked up to find the bluest gaze upon him. That moment had stayed with him in daylight and darkness. He was still waiting for that moment to fade from memory. But it didn’t. If anything, it became more intense. And he had no idea if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Chapter Eight

“Thanks for coming into the office this afternoon. I’m glad we could finally find time for our schedules to mesh. I’ve got a trial going on in Lubbock and we’ve been trying to seat a jury for three days now. The judge got tired of us, I think. Or he wanted to enjoy the three-day holiday coming up a bit early. It’s all good. Have a seat.” Matt swept his hand toward one of the deep-cushioned scarlet-leather chairs in front of his desk.

“I’m glad it worked out. Although I’m a bit mystified as to what I might have to do with the will of a man who never met me.” Deke had added a navy jacket to the white shirt and pressed jeans. A cream straw cowboy hat sat on its crown in the chair next to him. It was his “business” attire when not in a flight suit or off the time clock in his head.

“Ben Hawkes was a man who marched to a different beat from most men. It took a lot to figure him out. But he also was a man who never stopped loving the woman who cast him and their boys aside so easily one day. Most other men in his position, well, they wouldn’t have been so understanding. He also tried to keep tabs on what was going on with you two. Then he got too ill all of a sudden, and he left me with his instructions. That leads us to today.” He picked up a folder in front of him and withdrew the two pieces of paper from inside it.

“He was aware that your father wasn’t given much to providing for your mother or you. He had plans to set aside something for your mother when he fell ill. About that same time, we got word that your mother had passed. So he hurried to get things in place for what he wanted to do for you... as his way of showing his feelings for her child. Anyway, it is quite simple. He split the bulk of the Hawkes’s ranch between Jaxson and Beaudry. That included the house and other buildings. But he also set aside a parcel of land in your name, if the day came we were able to hand it over to you. It is a sweet parcel... good land and good water on it... three thousand acres. It’s yours. If, for some reason, you have a senile moment and don’t want any of it... then you can’t sell it. It will revert back into the ranch holdings of your half brothers.”

Deke felt like he had been hit by a punch in the gut out of the blue. He was shocked. A stranger did this for a child he had never met. But it was really a testament to a man who wanted to state his love and forgiveness for a woman most would have written off. A man he never met had reached out to make sure he had something in life besides nothing. He was at once sorry that he had never met him. He was sorry, too, that Ben Hawkes would not know that he had made something out of nothing himself. Something told him that the man would have been pleased.

“Do Beaudry and Jaxson know about this? And why he did it?”

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“Right before their dad died, he told them. They were shocked. But then they had other things to worry about and time passed and, believe it or not, they matured. Don’t share that with them. And they had no problem. But they kept it quiet, hoping that one day we might find you. And then you ended up finding us instead. Anyway, do you accept the gift?”

“This is something I want to get right.” Deke needed to think it through.

“The land isn’t going anywhere. Think all you need. Take a ride out and look it over. Try it on for a few days,” he said, a little levity injected into the moment. “Make the decision when it’s right for you. You know where to find me.”

The pair shook hands, and Deke went across the street to where he had parked the Jeep beside the courthouse square. The folder went into the passenger seat. He headed in the direction of the hospital. He parked in his usual spot and went inside. His office was on the first floor, off the emergency rooms. Luckily, it was quiet. Only one trauma room was in use out of the six rooms designated as such.

“Hello, may I help you? Are you looking for a patient?” The voice was familiar and strangely calming to his racing mind. He turned in its direction.

Kenzie stood there and the surprise registered on her face when she reacted to the “cowboy” in their midst.

“I haven’t had time to change into my usual uniform. I had some personal business in town today. It’s been slow, I take it, since my pager hasn’t gone off?”

“No air traffic until we have to pick up a transport from Amarillo. Jay began his vacation, so I’ll take his spot. There’ll be a neo nurse on the trip with the infant.”

“Sounds good. You’ll be in the copilot seat. I’ll meet you at the bird.”

*

Kenzie was usually good at reading people. It came in handy in her profession. Twenty minutes later of mostly quiet, she got the vibe from Deke’s body language and his silences that perhaps he didn’t feel the need for extra conversation. Either that or he was making it overly clear that there would be no overlapping of the time he spent off the clock in the company of an employee and her daughter and the office hours. Either way, she would give him space and quiet. She turned her attention to the scenery in front of them and outside her window. She could only hope that he hadn’t read anything more into the moment when their gazes might have lingered with each other a bit longer than she would have liked. That’s the problem. You did feel something.

The last thing she needed was the voice in her head being outspoken. And the truly last thing she needed was to let her guard down with her boss... another flyboy. Been there, done that, and never to be repeated.

They reached their destination and, while Deke checked out the chopper and spoke to the local control tower and weather center, she met the nurse and saw the chart on the preemie they would be carrying. Then she met the little girl in person and her heart melted. It usually did for the children they often flew, some under the worst of circumstances. This one was going to a regional trauma center with a superb unit to help her grow and thrive, so she could join a mom and dad who were already en route to the hospital to await her arrival.

Her pager went off and she noted Deke’s code that meant to move it. She and the

nurse wheeled the child and its accompanying support system onto the tarmac and then situated the unit through the wide side door opening, stabilizing it and making sure all wires and equipment were on and talking to each other. The baby would be monitored on the entire trip by the team it was leaving and then by the team standing ready to receive her at her new trauma site.

Deke made a final check around the craft and then climbed into the pilot's seat. The rotors were flipped on and the craft began waking up.

"All set to transport?"

"Yes, sir. All set," she responded as usual. The rotors were rocking the craft as the speed increased and, with very little movement on his part, Deke lifted the chopper off its skids and skyward.

"We'll be racing a dry line that is throwing off some strong columns. I don't want to deal with those conditions, so I'll be punching it home. I'll try to keep us out of the rough edges if possible. Hopefully, we'll get that little girl safe and sound on the ground with her parents, and you can get home to Brooke before the storm can kick up too much."

"Luckily, Brooke is spending the night with Jackie's twins. Although she made sure to remind me that she had a lesson that she couldn't be late for tomorrow afternoon. If you're getting tired of the lesson commitment, we can get you off the hook. Brooke can be an enthusiastic student and taskmaster rolled into one."

"I doubt that she's tired of them. It might be her mother? I know I'm still in."

He had sent her a look as he had said the words. It was the first time he had actually looked at her that entire day. But then he had turned his attention back to the instrument panel.

“Well, it isn’t me, either. Guess we’ll see you at the pool unless the storm hangs around.”

“Do you have a thing about swimming?”

Where did that question come from? “A thing about swimming? What do you mean by that?”

“It was a hot afternoon and you sat there beside a great pool and didn’t even put your toes into the water.”

“I love to swim. I just wanted to read the book I brought with me.”

“That sounds like a lame excuse. If you’re one of those females who doesn’t want to be seen in a swimsuit, don’t worry. I won’t look. We’ll be on the other end of the pool. No reason you shouldn’t enjoy the water too.”

He wouldn’t look. He said it so nonchalantly that the fact she believed him made her even more angry that he had even thought that was the reason. Her chin lifted.

“If I do decide to go swimming, I will go. I couldn’t care less who else is around.”

“And so you shouldn’t. But you get in the pool tomorrow, and I will not be paying attention.”

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That sounded like a dare to her. If he knew her better, he'd know that daring her was the same as waving a red flag in front of a bull. She just might have to prove a point.

"We'll see if I'm in the mood when the time comes." She turned her attention to the view below, and now and then, her gaze fell on the darkening cloud bank that seemed to be trying to outrace and outflank them. She had flown enough with him to know he was a good pilot, so she trusted the man with his hands on the controls. Until she felt an odd shudder from beneath her feet. She paused and waited to see if it was her imagination.

It wasn't.

"By any chance, did you...?" she began.

"Noted already. I've been running a systems check. And I don't like what the hydraulics are doing. I need to pull more power in light of the weather's increase in speed, but she's not cooperating."

"So we need to set it down at the closest hospital, or clinic, even. We don't have any large towns around us. Can we find the main highway in case we need to land there and have help...?"

"I've got this. I'll keep her in the air as long as we can. I'm alerting the ground crew. There's no need to panic."

"I wasn't panicking. I was going for a plan B. There's lightning in that huge cloud to the east," she pointed out... if only she could ignore the growing streaks.

“The land beneath us is not very hospitable... pretty rough. I’m trying to get to some of the farmland ahead of us if possible, in case I need to set it down.”

Kenzie realized her fingers had dug themselves into the seat cushion. She tried to ease them back. Perhaps she should have rethought the idea that being a trauma flight nurse would be a good career move. The ground seemed farther away each time she looked.

She looked at Deke’s face and saw the rock-hard set of the jaw. He was speaking in distinct terminology to someone in his headset, which was mostly gibberish to her. He was calm, but he was being very precise and getting the brevity of the situation across. In the meantime, she was aware that the young nurse in the back of the craft was looking a bit pale and her movements were shaky.

“Do you need me up here beside you for any reason?” Kenzie asked Deke. His gaze jerked to her with a scowl.

“If you’re frightened, then, no, you wouldn’t be any help. I’ve got this.”

She wanted to let him know what she thought about his attitude, but she also knew that she needed to settle the situation growing in the back of the craft. They didn’t need a truly hysterical person to deal with. And she also wanted to position herself to better protect the infant in case things went from bad to worse. She unclipped her seat belt and began to maneuver between seats toward the small space left in the back beside the cubicle that held the child.

Her gaze took in the instrument readings on the panel while she began speaking to the nurse in low, measured tones to get her attention and try to keep her nerves in check. The best thing was to get her to concentrate on something besides the situation.

“Marcy, I need you to read the panel above the unit and speak the numbers slowly

into your headset so the nurses at the center can chart them. Can you do that and not stop? We want to catch any change in the normal vitals in the second they begin to change.”

The young girl nodded. She took a calming breath, and her gaze fastened on the numbers. Hopefully, the nurse at the call center desk would understand why she was asking the girl to do that, and her precise tones would help. Kenzie maneuvered herself into the space where she could see the monitors and yet have more support against the unit housing the baby in case of rough weather... or worse.

“Is that the wind or something else?” Kenzie said into her headset. Only Deke would hear her. She didn’t need to distract the woman beside her. The shaking beneath their feet had become more noticeable.

“Both. The storm is outracing us, and the wind clouds are almost on us. I’ve given coordinates, and I’m looking for a place to set us down. So buckle in. It’s likely to be a rough set down. There’s a dirt road a half mile ahead if I can get us there. Just hold on.”

She didn’t need to be told that one. She indicated the same to the nurse on the other side of the unit, who nodded her understanding. The child was calm and sleeping, oblivious to the drama around this portion of her trip. Kenzie wished she was sleeping through it, also, but there was no chance of that. If...when they made it to the ground, they had to hope all the equipment on the child would not be damaged. Help needed a way to get to them. But there was a mean storm headed for their location too. How could a quiet, easy trip turn so bad, so quickly? Bless Texas weather, that’s how.

“Setting her down. Hang on back there.” Deke’s voice was low and steady. He had nerves of steel. And she was glad of it. She felt them dropping and the wind pushing them sideways.

Kenzie thought of Brooke and repeated the same prayer over and over under her breath as the first jolt of contact with the inanimate rock-hard earth shook the cabin. Her grip increased on the infant beside her as she gritted her teeth and her body was jerked hard against the harness that held her in her seat. The power went off inside the cabin and alarms on batteries were set off on the preemie unit. Within a minute, the lights and air sounds came back to life.

“Check in back there,” Deke’s command came through the silence. “Kenzie, are you okay? The patient? Speak up!”

“We’re okay. Systems are up. You woke our patient, but she seems to want to finish out her nap. Nurse Barnes was in contact with the trauma desk, but we’ve lost them.”

“I need you to bring a pair of scissors or other sharp blades up front.”

Kenzie grabbed a pair of scissors from the leg pocket of her flight suit.

“The seat belt jammed on the side casing. I need to cut myself out of it,” he said as she stepped back into the front. That’s when she saw that somehow they were sitting flat on hard rock with boulders on one side and a drop-off on the other.

“That’s a nice piece of flying,” she said as Deke worked on the thick material with the scissors. “Or should I say landing? Into the side of a hill or down a canyon. You earned your keep today.”

“I earned my keep but lost it again on one damaged pile of metal.” He broke through the belt and extricated himself from the seat. Opening his door, he was able to slide out and stand. “I’m going to come around and open the side door if I can. We need to get up to the road I saw before we went down. It’s on the other side of that hill. There should already be help on the way.”

Kenzie jumped down from the open doorway when he was able to slide it open after some work. He was already checking under the craft and through the rest of the damage. Raindrops had begun to fall, pelting up puffs of dirt as they hit the dry ground.

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“The good news is that I don’t see any problems with fuel leaking out... at least nothing I can see or smell right now. So we can use the inside to keep our passengers dry until help arrives. I’ll go up to the road and set off a beacon I have, just in case.”

“I can do that. You know this aircraft, and if anything does start, you’ll know it. And you’re a trauma medic, so you’re here just in case. I do have some practice with climbing skills—thanks to my daughter, as you well know. So I’ve got this.” She reached out a hand for the beacon.

“It’s raining.”

“I can see that.” Kenzie reached into an overhead bin and pulled out a plastic rain poncho. “It isn’t very stylish, but it will keep some of the water off me. Now I need to get moving.” She jumped to the ground. He did the same.

She pulled on the poncho.

“Be careful,” he said. “There are some loose rocks along that hillside. The more I think about this, the more I need to go.”

“Arguing is wasting time.” She didn’t give him time to reconsider again. Choosing a path, she began her climb. Five minutes into it, with the rain getting some sting to it when it hit her face, she realized that maybe it wasn’t the best of ideas. Especially since she didn’t need to turn and look down to where she started to know that Deke’s eyes were boring into her back.

Next time, don’t volunteer.

Chapter Nine

“This day just keeps getting better.” Those words echoed through the empty house and came back to roost on Kenzie’s shoulders with all their weight. The rain was steady outside. Their rescuers arrived twenty minutes after Deke set the craft down. At least they had completed the run, and the patient was secured in a nice, dry space. She left Deke talking to the crew that would be heading out to bring in the helicopter.

The moment she stepped through her front door, a river of water met her at the kitchen door. Actually, it might be a tiny stream, but in her mind, adding what it was going to cost her to get a plumber or whatever was needed to plug up the hole, she wanted to scream... which she did. And it felt good, so she did it again.

A crash made her jump, her brain assessing the fact there was no lightning, so would it be thunder? And then there was the sound of heavy running steps down the hallway and a man came through the opening with a boat oar in his hands like a baseball bat over his shoulder, ready to slug something or someone. He stopped. She stopped. And they faced off.

“Kenzie, are...?”

“What is going on?! Are...?”

They both shouted at the same time, and then there was silence.

“Did you just bust through my front door?” Her voice rose on the last word. That was a warning to people who knew her that she just might be ready to explode.

“I came up on the porch, I heard the scream... I looked through the window, didn’t see you, and then you screamed again. I reacted.”

“With that?” She nodded at the oar, still against his shoulder. That caused him to lower it to his side.

“Sorry, but I didn’t have time to run back home and grab a gun. Thank heavens.”

“You thought I needed help? Someone was in here with me?”

“That’s what it sounded like. Sorry about the door. I’ll fix that right away.” He had the good sense to look sorry.

Kenzie shook her head. “I screamed because I had had enough rain and a day that went into the toilet, and when I walked in and found water all over the floor from another leak, I just needed to let it all out.” She took a breath and then shook her head. “And now there’s a busted door in addition to the leak. I’d say that things can’t get worse, but then I’m sure I’d be proved wrong somehow.” She began walking toward the living room and stopped a few feet from the place where her door was literally hanging from one top hinge, the doorframe splintered along one side.

“You’ll have a new door by this time tomorrow,” Deke spoke up. “And if you’ll let me, I can take a look at the leak and see just what the problem is.”

“You don’t have to do that, and it’s raining, so...”

“So it’s a good time to work on the door and see the leak in action. I need to make a call and then get something from my Jeep, and I will be right back.” He was gone before she could find another reason to decline his help.

“Great. A man who doesn’t listen. Imagine that.” She could be silent and let him knock himself out being Superman—only she didn’t need rescuing. That’s what she told herself as she drew in another deep breath. It was time to get the mop and get busy.

It wasn't long, and he was back with something resembling a toolbox in his hand. She tried to concentrate on cleaning up the water and then seeing how to stem the flow. Not much to be done with it still raining and no way anyone was getting on the roof. There was some hammering coming from the living room area. She knew it was better to stay out of the room while he did his thing. She had no idea how he was going to get a door put in quickly, but she was just going to take care of what she could do.

That's why, a half hour later, having cleaned up the water trail as best she could, her worst fear turned out to be not so bad. It wasn't a leaking roof. It was a cracked tubing behind the refrigerator that ran water to the ice maker. A quick check on her trusty cell phone online, and she found what she needed to do with some heavy-duty tape and the water shut off until she could get a replacement hose. She felt pretty good about taking care of the problem. And then she realized all was quiet in the living room. She went down the hallway and then stopped. There was a different door where the broken one had been.

Deke was on the porch, talking to someone who had arrived while she was working in the back of the house. The man left soon after, and Deke stepped through the door. He smiled.

"We were in luck that the local lumberyard was able to bring out some framing materials, along with the hardware. It was easy enough to switch it all out. Once you pick out the door you would like to have, we'll order it and put it in place of this plain one. But at least you have a door to secure once again. And I promise I won't kick in the next one."

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“I’m glad of that. And I am amazed you were able to do this. I would never guess you had carpentry skills, along with your piloting.”

“It’s a hobby I picked up a while back. It’s a stress reliever for me. Surely you have a way you deal with stress?”

“When I figure out what it is, I’ll let you know. Thankfully, the rain has let up a little. Of course, Brooke won’t be happy if it stops, because that’s why we canceled the diving lesson for this afternoon and she went to spend the night with Jackie’s kids, in lieu of that. Right now, you are ranking above a sleepover, so congratulations.”

Deke smiled, and something about it struck Kenzie. It was a smile, for goodness’ sake. She had seen him smile before. Maybe the stress was getting to her after all. A rainy afternoon alone with a good-looking man... her nurses could give her plenty of ideas what to do with the time. But she needed to remember the rules... no romance with a boss; no romance with a flyboy; no romance... period. She might control her body, but her mind was another matter. It went to all sorts of places that didn’t make things easier.

And it seemed it was about to go in search of more trouble after she heard the words come out of her mouth next.

“I’m sorry. I may have sounded ungrateful earlier... about the door. The fact that you reacted the way you did when you thought I might need help, well, that was something I really am grateful for. You were trying to help in a potentially bad situation. Thank you for the thought and for the door. But I will pick out the permanent door, and I will pay for it. And there won’t be any discussion on that

score. And if you don't have other plans, I do have dinner warming. Nothing spectacular... just tomato soup and grilled cheese. The least I can do is feed you after all of this."

"Tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches... that sounds like the perfect food for a rainy evening in my book. I haven't had that combination since I was a kid. I do want to take a quick look at the leak, though."

"While you were taking care of the door, I took care of the leak. In case you think I'm one of those females who are in need of rescuing all the time, I'm not. I have my own toolkit. I taught myself to change a flat tire. I can unclog toilets. Do I need to go on?"

He was silent for a long moment. Had she made him mad in some way? He was, after all, her boss. Then there was a slow shake of his head. "Okay. So now I know who to call next time the kitchen sink backs up. Would it be overstepping if I offered to set the table?" There was a true grin. Too late for her brain to ask if it had been wise to offer the dinner invite. Too late, indeed.

*

"Dining room or kitchen?" the woman closing the oven door asked. Her back was turned to him across the kitchen. "I'll leave it to you, the guest of honor."

"I'm a no-frills guy. It's the people seated around a table that make the difference to me, not the crystal and fine china, or the lack thereof. In fact, paper plates and bowls make more sense this evening. And I have a question for you."

Kenzie turned toward him with a questioning look.

"Does it upset you that I did take care of the front door without consulting you? Is that the heart of the matter earlier?"

“The heart of the matter?” she responded after a soft sigh. “I overreacted on that one. That was before I knew the true cause of the water leak. I envisioned roof repairs and empty bank accounts at the end of it. I just had to replace the heating unit last winter. It’s been a stream of little headaches since I took this place on. So I just reacted first and thought it out later.”

“I guess I assumed you had inherited this house from your family.”

She tossed him an amused look. “And since I’m related to the Burkitts of the legendary Aces High, that means I have a conduit to their bank vaults. Sorry to disappoint, but my mother’s Texas-sized pride kept that from happening. What I have, I’ve had to work for. My daughter and I have built a nice life, but we don’t take it for granted. We live on a budget. Brooke sees the difference in our lifestyle and those of her cousins. But we make it work.”

Deke was suddenly reminded of the look he had seen in Kenzie’s eyes earlier. It was akin to those he had witnessed often in his mother’s eyes. He had grown up in a household without a strong husband/father figure. Too much worry about bills and keeping a roof over their heads had led to a worn-out, disillusioned woman too old before her time. He had lost her too soon. And in the same thought, he didn’t want to see that look again in Kenzie’s eyes, nor have Brooke’s giggles and zest for life ever diminished. He experienced an incredible urge to step up and be the rescuer. Except the person who might need rescuing would rather toss the lifeline back in his face than accept it. He had no idea how to deal with that... yet.

Yes, a small crack had begun in the wall he had constructed over the years, and it was beginning to fissure. It had begun about the same time he shook hands with Kenzie Calhoun after Dr. Damian had introduced them that day almost two months ago. In doing such a good job of walling off people, he was often seen as aloof and even cold at times. He had seen it as his defense mechanism. Keep people at a distance, and you wouldn’t get feelings involved. But then he hadn’t come across Kenzie and her

daughter. And he was sliding down a slippery slope toward feelings he hadn't expected to feel.

At the same time, it could be very complicated. He was the boss and she was the employee. It wasn't too difficult to recognize a fellow wall builder. Until he understood that better, he was sliding blindfolded down that hill. Keep it simple. Don't crowd.

"I did warn you that it was going to be simple dinner fare," she said several minutes later as he took his seat in the dining alcove at the blue gingham-checked tablecloth-covered table. The built-in banquette was upholstered in the same color of solid-blue material. The curtains were open and allowed them to see the rain was holding steady. It made for a coziness in the room that wasn't lost on Deke. He had an idea it was what was also unsettling Kenzie a bit.

"The soup smells delicious. And the sandwich is grilled just the way I like it. I wasn't aware that you had fresh fruit salad on the menu, as well." He laid the napkin in his lap and picked up the soup spoon.

"It seemed nice to add since I didn't bake anything for dessert. I usually just fix something very light if I'm home by myself without Brooke. No need to fix a more complete meal for just one in the evening. She's going to be sorry she missed being here for dinner with you. I think you might have realized that she sort of idolizes you. You are teaching her to dive and all."

Deke smiled, having taken a tasting of the soup and a bite of sandwich. "I've never been an idol to anyone before. But she's a very easy child to enjoy being around. You've done an excellent job of raising her. I know that being a single mom and raising a child can be one of the hardest jobs there is. And you manage a stress-filled day job on top of it. If anyone deserves to be idolized, it would be you. And this food is great, by the way. Yet another reason to put you at the top of the list."

“Opening a can of soup and adding a little seasoning doesn’t make me a five-star chef. Although adding the two different cheeses to the sandwich, that might be a stroke of genius,” she said with a grin appearing. Deke liked that there was a touch of color on her cheeks and a lively spark in those eyes. They needed to appear more often.

“Genius is definite.” They both took a few more bites of food as a comfortable silence settled over their corner of the room.

“This is a personal question, and I don’t want you to think I’m prying or...”

“You’re going to ask about Brooke’s father.” She stated it simply and helped put him out of his awkward rambling in getting to the subject. “I’m surprised the hospital gossip hotline didn’t make it known already.”

“I don’t partake in a lot of conversations with people at the hospital, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. However, I have been told I have the hearing of a bat.”

The color heightened on her cheeks. “I’m so sorry. I did admonish them about gossip. And I shouldn’t have said more than that.”

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“It was the truth. We hadn’t gotten to know each other very much before then. And like I’ve said... I don’t say much. I missed the line where the ability to be a sparkling conversationalist was being handed out. Lone Wolf was my call sign in the military, given to me by my fellow soldiers. It stuck. I own it. But yes, I admit to a natural curiosity about Brooke’s father.”

“He was a mistake I made coming out of my early twenties. I had gone to a dance with a friend of mine whose dad was stationed at the base in Abilene. This person walked over to me and asked me to dance. He flew jets, and he was quite a ladies’ man. And it took less than a year to figure out that my rose-colored glasses needed to be filed in the trash can. I was basically the last one on the base to know. One of his women decided to have one too many drinks at the base club one evening and proceeded to enlighten me in front of an audience that everyone knew but me. That led to a second one joining in, and he seemed to be amused by it all and looked even proud of it. Brooke was two months old. I packed as much as I could for us in two suitcases, and she and I left. He didn’t make too much of a protest. I think he was relieved that he was free again.”

Deke felt his appetite slide away. And he would have liked to come across the man in an alley. “You got custody? He doesn’t want to be in his child’s life?”

“Six months later, while in Afghanistan, he was caught trading in ‘souvenirs’—that was his term. The government used the term antiquities. He was sentenced to jail time. But while being transferred to one of his court appearances, the convoy was hit. He was killed. We had agreed that I would have full custody given his situation, but it was null and void when he died. As far as Brooke knows, her father loved her and he was lost in a battle. There’s no need for details. She has no recollection of him. It’s

been her and me, and we've managed to make a pretty good team, just the two of us."

And that's the way she wants it. He read between the lines loud and clear. And yet, he always did have a streak in him of finding a way around roadblocks and solving problems. He might need to give it some thought. The thought that he wanted to solve such a problem stunned him into silence.

"And what about you? The lone wolf never wanted to test matrimonial waters?" Now it was her turn. Fair enough.

"I got to the water's edge once. Bought the ring and set the date. A month before I was to return stateside for the wedding, I got that infamous 'Dear John' letter. Seems she decided that her uncle's junior lawyer made a better candidate for husband material than a pilot... and certainly one that was leaving the military to take a chance on his own business. Last I heard, she was having her second child. So things worked out well for her, I guess."

"I'm sorry. That's a low blow to do something like that in a letter and not face-to-face."

Deke shrugged and took a sip of his iced tea. "It wasn't meant to be. Of course, it pushed me to not put myself out there in the trust department again. I had decided that the military would be my life. Until it wasn't to be, and Ranger and I were 'retired.'"

"How did you end up with a flying business?"

"Well, I had a bit of luck when the person I had done part-time ranch flying for before my military stint looked me up after I got back stateside. He had an offer to make. He invested in my skills and we partnered with a couple of choppers. Then it expanded. He stepped out of it after five years and I bought it all. He had a stroke last

year and we lost him. His widow is a great lady who continues to be very supportive. She's taught me a lot about the business, but also counsels me in areas I missed out on in my growing up. Who knew I had a head for business? It took someone believing in my abilities and teaching me to do the same. I brought on more pilots and more choppers and now we do medical flying and the ranch work too. I'm considering branching into executive air charters for Fortune 500 companies next. As they say, the sky's the limit. I might as well see if that is true."

She smiled. "You say it so nonchalantly, but I'm thinking there was a lot of work mixed in with luck to get you where you wanted to be. I'd also say that an ex of yours might have made a bad decision."

"I think it wasn't meant to be, and life had another plan for me. At least, that's what my mentor told me often enough. My only regret is that my mother never got to know a better life. I wanted to give her that house and ease from worrying about where our next meal was coming from or how to keep the lights on. We all have regrets, I guess. A wise person told me one day not long ago that we have to overcome the fear of where the next hurt or regret might come from. If we don't, we might miss something amazing in front of us. At least I try to hang on to that idea."

"That's a hard one," she said, a solemn gaze watching the rain fall outside. "I had to learn to trust myself. That's how Brooke and I survived. I wasn't going to depend on anyone but myself. So far, it's working."

"It would be nice sometime to share the load. Too easy to color others the same shade as the ones who couldn't be counted on. And that's a deep subject for a rainy evening. I need to get back to my house and check on Ranger." He stood and picked up his empty bowl and plate.

She stood and reached for them. He shook his head. "I do have kitchen skills in the cleaning up area. You cooked and I can clean."

“It wouldn’t do any good to argue, would it?”

“Smart lady.” So he cleaned off the table and put things away where she directed in the refrigerator and cabinets as she made swift work of the dishes.

He dried his hands on the towel she handed over. “See what teamwork can do? Now you have time to relax and enjoy some ‘you’ time while Brooke is off having her fun. No worries about the door. We’ll do it your way. All is good.”

She walked him to her new front door and he opened it. “I’ll make a run for my Jeep. It looks like it’s about to let up in the rain department soon enough. Thanks again for the meal. It was nice having someone with a more expansive vocabulary than barking to have a conversation with.”

“You’re welcome for the meal and for all you did on repairs.”

He smiled. “I’ll just say good night on that note. Sweet dreams.”

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Sweet dreams indeed. Kenzie opened her eyes the next morning to a sliver of sunlight coming underneath the curtains at her bedroom window. Five minutes and the alarm would sound on the bedside table. She closed her eyes and willed herself to go back and finish the dream, but it was elusive. It had been so very nice.

It involved a rainy evening, lights twinkling in trees. It was obviously holiday time. And she was walking with her arm tucked inside the crook of a male counterpart’s arm. His other hand held an umbrella over their heads. They walked and talked—about what, she had no recall. But it was what they did after they paused and the talking stopped. Kenzie had dreamed of the most romantic, sexy kiss... it had sizzled from the top of her head down to her toes and back again. She had never

wanted it to end. She had opened her eyes in that perfect dream and met the gaze of her dream lover... Deacon Hayes. And then she woke up. And she laid there, staring at the ceiling until the buzzing of the alarm would not be ignored.

Why in the world would she have such a dream? And about the man who was her boss? It was wrong on so many levels, yet why did it feel so perfectly wonderful too? Kenzie tossed back the covers and sat up, her feet meeting soft carpet. It was dinner. That's why he'd appeared in her dream. It didn't mean anything.

Didn't mean anything? Then why did it replay so often in her brain? While she dressed for the day... when she made her first cup of coffee... buttered her bagel. Many of her dreams faded the moment she opened her eyes and she couldn't recall most of them. But this one was on constant rewind.

Why him? She hadn't even kissed him in reality. Nor would she. That was a line one didn't cross. At least she didn't. So why would he be the one that made her feel the power of her dream lover's kiss in such aching detail that she never wanted to leave his arms? There was no response to that question. Just as well... chalk it up to fantasy and being without the company of a real man in her life for so long... so very long. Snap out of it. You're just as bad as the nurses you scolded. It didn't mean a thing.

*

It didn't mean a thing. Did he truly believe that? The fact that he lay awake most of the night after having dinner with Kenzie? Deke closed his eyes and the evening kept replaying word for word. It explained a lot about the way she seemed guarded at times, careful of her words, so determined to be in charge... to not be needy of anyone or anything. Except he had seen the façade slip. And there was uncertainty and fear there for a glimpse. Being vulnerable meant the possibility of letting someone get too close and that might bring the pain back and wreck those walls encompassing her

world. She was prepared for that the world to include only Brooke and herself and no one else. Trust was a word, not a reality.

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He'd felt that once. Then he knew that trusting himself was the only way he would survive. But he could see that trust was elusive and tenuous. Yet he believed that there was a small part of that wall that wanted to let the light shine in. He knew what it was to face impossible situations where all the odds seemed stacked against him. But he had trusted in himself and his abilities. And he knew that was the bridge he needed to build. He could build it, but she would need to want to take the steps to cross it. It was asking him to gamble on another human besides himself. Did he know what he was considering?

Chapter Ten

“Okay, drum roll, please!”

“Is she serious?” Kenzie whispered as she leaned closer to Sammi Jo, who stood beside her on the sidewalk. She had joined Laurel and Sammi Jo for breakfast at what used to be known as Coffee and a Chat. But they had arrived to find a group of patrons gathered on the corner in front of the café slash bakery slash bookstore slash candle emporium. Hence the sign had been placed on the newly rechristened business... Coffee, Chat and Etc! Some of the more boisterous in the crowd gave Tallie, the owner, the drum roll she requested. Others did a more sedate clapping.

“Serious as a tax audit,” Laurel responded as Sammi Jo nodded.

“Don't you mean serious as a heart attack?” Kenzie commented.

“I'm a business geek and you are a health professional, so whatever is most appropriate goes. Now let's get inside and beat the others to the home-baked

goodies,” Laurel responded. And everyone definitely enjoyed the free trays of pastries and coffee that filled the long bar inside after the unveiling.

“We sit back here.” Sammi Jo led the way once they had their plates in hand. “This is our reserved booth. Tallie won’t let anyone else occupy it.” They slid into the U-shaped seating. Tallie appeared behind them with a pot of coffee and brightly colored mugs for each.

“Laurel’s mug is gold... in honor of those little guys she collects.” Tallie grinned, setting the mugs around the table. “Sammi Jo is bright green, matching her favorite eye color and the fields her horses run in, mine is multicolored, depending on the day and mood I am in. And when they told me that we were initiating a new member of the table elite, their cousin from the big city, I think bright blue as the Texas sky you fly in.” She handed over the mug.

“Thank you! This is a surprise and a great honor... I can’t think of a better group to be part of.” They all shared laughter.

Tallie slid into the open space. Laurel poured coffee for all of them. “These two have been so happy to have you back in the fold here,” Tallie said to Kenzie. She blew on the hot coffee to cool it down some. “And you have a really special gig. Flying around with the hottest hunk in town.” Laurel’s throat-clearing interrupted her.

Tallie shook her head. “Excuse me... the most eligible hottest hunk in town. The others have been taken already.”

“True,” Sammi Jo high-fived her sister.

“So tell us.” Tallie grinned. “Are those skies really as friendly as we might hope?”

Kenzie swallowed the bit of pastry. And how would she answer that one? They might

really be kidding with her, but the kiss from her dream flashed through her brain again. She did as always when a question was personal... she simply gave a “quiet” smile and sipped her coffee.

“I knew it.” Tallie sighed. “It’s as great as we think. That’s depressing.”

“Come on, you’ve got a ring on your finger. So you shouldn’t be worrying about anything else.”

Tallie gave Laurel a shake of her head. “A ring that is growing dusty with age.” She wiggled the finger with the solitaire on it.

“Well, we have our work cut out for us this year then,” Sammi Jo spoke up. “We give Tallie and her Dawson a major shove down that aisle, and for our dear Kenzie... we can share that friendship is the best of all beginnings. Don’t miss out on it.”

Something about her cousin’s words struck a chord inside her. But she kept her expression noncommittal. “We’ll see.” She was glad when the next topic came along.

“Founders’ Day is coming. The committees will be forming soon. And then there’s the Labor Day picnic, celebrating the end of summer.”

“Isn’t that all exciting? So much to do, so little time.” And there stood Melba Tweet, aka, the Twitt... the bane of their existence and the gossip queen of the newspaper. Showing up like a bad penny. Kenzie looked at her counterparts and their identical smiles almost made her want to bust a gut of laughter. She had to bite down on her bottom lip. And then she was in the headlights.

“Look who’s back among us! I was so surprised to hear you came back to our little town. But I was afraid the big city might be a bit too much for a widow and child. But never fear, my dear. I am sure one of your married friends can find a nice man that

doesn't mind having a wife with a child already in tow. Maybe I should think about starting a singles advertisement in my newspaper. I'll let you know."

"And you should go check into that idea right now," Laurel spoke up, her sister nonchalantly laying a hand on her arm to remind her to breathe first. "You wouldn't want someone else to hear about it and beat you to the punch. Bye now." Laurel didn't win Academy Awards for nothing. Her "bye now" meant so much more. Melba opened her mouth and then shut it... sort of like a guppy taking in air. At least, that's the impression that came to Kenzie's mind.

"See you later then, girls."

"Not if we see you first," Tallie muttered. "I'm sorry, Kenzie."

"Don't be. I remember the Twitt from when I grew up here. She is still as obnoxious as ever."

"And just as much a waste of time as ever. Now where were we?" Laurel popped another bite of cinnamon roll into her mouth and the genuine smile came back.

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"Mama, Mama... guess what?" Brooke was in full throttle before Kenzie cleared the car door. "Jackie invited me to go camping with them. A real camping trip, with tents and a campfire, with s'mores and everything. Please, can I go, please?"

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“How about you take a breath, give your old mom a hug and kiss, and then let me get details from Ms. Jackie... sound like a plan?”

“Okay.” A swift kiss and giant hug ensued, and then Brooke was off to rejoin the other two girls on the swings.

“Sorry you got blindsided,” Jackie called out, coming down the steps. They shared a quick hug and then found two comfy chairs on the patio to sit and watch the kids while they caught up.

“Is this a case of her being invited, or did she invite herself?” Kenzie asked.

“No, no... we would love to have her. The idea struck me while we were watching a cartoon and they were making s'mores around a campfire, and the kids started talking about how much fun it is, and they can hardly wait until we go on our yearly camping trip to the canyons. Brooke looked so enthralled and I thought, why not see if she might like to do something like that? But the caveat was that she had to ask nicely, and whatever your decision, she would not be upset. We should have also said wait until she stops the car and takes time to breathe,” Jackie said, ending with a shake of her head.

“When is this camping trip?”

“Next month... almost four weeks. We try to do it before time to get the kids ready for school and day care and David goes back to coaching sports. The park rangers are great and have programs for the kids to enjoy as well. So while they are having fun, they might not realize it, but they are also being taught some things. The swimming

pool has lifeguards, the area is patrolled. The kids are never without one of us with them, whatever they do.”

Kenzie shook her head. “I know that you and David would take very good care in all that you do. That’s not it. I don’t know if I can be on my own for seven days you had booked. She and I have never been apart longer than two days. Brooke will do just fine, I have no doubt, but it’s me I worry about.” They laughed at the thought. But Kenzie knew it was just another sign her little girl wouldn’t be that for long. And she pushed those thoughts far away into that cave at the back of her mind called denial.

“So, how did you enjoy your evening of freedom? Catch up on some binge-watching of our favorite shows?”

“Well, it rained and rained, as you know. I got home earlier than usual. And then I had my front door busted in by my boss, who thought he was coming to my rescue because I screamed my frustrations out when I found a large puddle on my floor, thinking the roof was a mess again. And...”

“Hold it, stop. Back it up, girlfriend.” Jackie’s gaze narrowed on her. “Repeat, please.”

“About the puddle on the floor or...”

“Don’t trifle with me. You know exactly the part, so give it up.”

“Just what I said... the poor man arrived on my doorstep, just as I let out my frustrations in a couple of screams, and he thought someone was attacking me, so he found that old boat oar that is on the porch, and armed with that, he busted in my front door, ready to do battle. Not my finest moment.”

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I missed this. What happened after that?”

“He fixed my door. Meanwhile, I discovered the pool was made by a broken water line going to my icemaker in the refrigerator. He and I had a discussion about what he would fix and what he would not. Evidently, he was surprised to find that a single mom might have had to learn a thing or two about house repairs. We agreed to go to neutral corners, and I thanked him for the door by providing him with a gourmet meal of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches in my kitchen. Then he went home.”

Jackie slowly shook her head. “I don’t know which is sadder—the menu or you letting the man go home. Have I not taught you anything? What did you talk about over this non-candlelight dinner?”

“We actually did have a talk about ourselves. I told him about my marriage and he told me about being jilted basically at the altar. So we compared our trust issues, I guess you could say. But he isn’t into dating employees, and it would be weird, I think too. Not that the idea of dating even came up. So get that look off your face. He knows that Brooke and I have made quite a comfy life for ourselves, and so has he.”

“Great... two ships passing and keeping going. Well, we have some work to do.”

“No, we do not. But Brooke and I do have to get home and do some work on her room. And I will keep my daughter in suspense about the camping trip until she eats all her dinner tonight.” She stood and motioned for Brooke.

“Well, I am glad you’re letting her join us. And you need to think about some things you can do just for yourself while she’s gone.”

Just for myself. Those words came to mind as she vacuumed the living room a couple of hours later. Brooke was upstairs, putting away her books and toys. What would a list for herself look like? Maybe read some books by authors she had been putting off because she was often too tired to keep her eyes open by the time she had put Brooke to bed and cleaned up the kitchen for the next day. Get a haircut. She looked at her

short nails. In her profession, having long beautiful nails was out, but maybe a manicure... she could splurge and get a pedicure too. Maybe take in a movie that wasn't a cartoon? Not exactly jetting off to the French Riviera. She shook her head. Then Brooke was running down the stairs and heading to the front door.

"He's here, Mama. Ranger's here. He's come to visit." The door had been unlocked and thrown open, just as Deke and the dog reached the top step. Kenzie wished Brooke had waited and at least given her time to put away the vacuum. And she might have chosen something to wear besides the older, faded pair of jeans and pink tank top. But too late to do anything but smile and move toward the doorway.

"I heard my dog get more of a reaction to his arrival than I did. I may get a complex." Deke reciprocated Brooke's fist bump. "Guess I've lost my sprinkles buddy."

"I'm still your sprinkles buddy. Ranger can't eat those. So you and I can eat them and be buddies."

"How about letting our guests come inside?" Kenzie reminded Brooke of her manners. Deke looked at her for the first time since his arrival. The smile was automatic. And her stomach had a weird reaction to it.

"Mr. Deke, can Ranger come up to my room? He can watch me put my stuff away in the closet and then maybe we can read a book together."

"I don't mind... if your mother doesn't." Brooke's head swung immediately in her direction.

"It's okay."

"Come on, Ranger. This is fun." The dog took his cue from Deke and, receiving the approval, he bounded up the stairs behind Brooke.

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“I hate to say it, but I’m afraid you’ll be hearing the dog plea more and more from your daughter.”

“And I’m sure you aren’t very sorry about that.” Kenzie moved into the living room, and he followed. “Do you usually carry your toolbox around?” She nodded at the metal box in his grip.

“Just in case I needed to do something else on the door. Or if you wanted me to check on the line. Best to be prepared. I didn’t come at a bad time, did I?”

“No, but feel free to check out the door and its frame. However, the line has been replaced by the tubing I picked up on the way home from the hardware store, and all is working just fine. Guess I might know a little something about home repair. But thanks for the offer to check on it. Surely you have better things to do with your free time.”

“It is important that your front door is secured. And I didn’t mean to infer in any way that you don’t know what you’re doing with home repairs. I would say it’s impressive if you wouldn’t think I was being a condescending male. But it would be a sincere compliment.” The tone in his voice matched the warmth in his gaze as he spoke, and her guard was definitely slipping. “Just keep in mind that I do work cheaper than anyone else in town. A large glass of sweet, iced tea when I’m done and seated in one of those rockers on your front porch might be good currency for the inspection job of one door. Sound like a good deal?”

She could say no and be a shrew, but she didn’t want to do that. She nodded. “Sounds about right, but don’t expect it with a lemon slice... that’s a bit much.”

“I never take lemon with my tea, so it’s a deal. I’ll get started. Don’t let me interrupt your dancing with that tough-looking fellow there in the corner.”

She grinned. The vacuum was obvious. “He is a very demanding partner, so I’d like to get back to him. And the clock is ticking on that iced tea payment.” She left him to his inspection as she returned the vacuum to its place in the hall closet. Had she actually flirted? It was a bit rusty. But he made it easy with his grin, those deep dimples showing up when she least expected and giving him a totally bad boy look. A girl would do well to not notice them. Or the way his jeans fit his long legs just right so that his departing side made her glance linger more than it should have. Not to even mention the stretch of material across a broad set of shoulders and over a chest that looked rock solid underneath the white pullover tee shirt.

Concentrate on what you’re doing. Kenzie put the noisemaker in its closet. She headed into the kitchen next, after a quick glance in the mirror in the small powder room under the stairs. She walked to the doorway and found Deke was wiping down his tools and putting them back into the box.

“Perfect timing,” he said. “Safe and secure again. I cleaned up the hardware and the locks. Hopefully, no one will put their foot through this one.”

“You guarantee your work?”

“Now I see... you’re a demanding client.”

“I have high standards. And there’s sweet tea on the line.”

“I aim to please. And I’m on call twenty-four seven for house calls.”

And the water had suddenly gotten very deep. She was treading as fast as she could. A more experienced female, like any one of her nurses, would know how to handle

the provocative flirting, but she was a novice. A female who wasn't certain she should even be thinking about flirting with anyone. It was tempting fate. Was it worth being on such shifting sand? His eyes and his body language and those slow tidal wave smiles were enough to tempt any female. Did she want to be tempted?

"Mama, my room's done. Do you want to inspect it?" The voice was a loud reminder of what temptation out of control could do. Kenzie turned and headed upstairs. Let him think her a coward. And he'd be right.

Brooke and Ranger sat side by side on the floor while she looked in the closet and the toy chest and under the bed. To her surprise, nothing but a pair of shoes lingered under there. Before, her daughter had been known to stash last-minute items out of sight before inspection. Even the closet floor was free of clutter, and shoes were lined up side by side. She looked at her daughter.

"So, which one of you did all of this?"

"I did most of it, Mama. But Ranger supervised, and he helped find lost socks and things like that. We're a team."

"I see. Well, you two teammates can go outside and get some exercise." They didn't need to be told twice. She followed them downstairs to pause at the bottom. Deke stood at the front door, two glasses of iced tea in his hands.

"I made myself useful. I didn't know how long inspections lasted, so I hedged my bet and timed it about right. Shall we take our tea on the veranda?"

"You are definitely a jack of all trades." She took her glass from him and he held the door open for her to go ahead of him. "I think the front porch is more suitable for a description rather than something as grand sounding as a 'veranda.'"

“As long as it has rocking chairs and a porch swing... then it can be as grand as any veranda.” He looked around. “You don’t have a porch swing. You don’t like them?”

“I love them. But it wasn’t on the necessity side of my furniture list when I moved in. One of these days, I’ll find one.” They sat in companionable silence, sipping their teas and watching Brooke throw a tennis ball and Ranger retrieve it. Kenzie couldn’t help but think how nice a moment it was. To any observer who didn’t know better, they would seem the typical family... father, mother, and child... and dog. That was the Hallmark greeting card cover she had hoped to have growing up. But life had other plans. She noted he was surveying the yard, and she could tell he had some thoughts churning in his brain.

“This yard was made for kids. It must have been a great place to grow up,” he said.

“It was. And we did have some good times here. We would have our friends come over and we did things like trampolines and camping under crudely made tents of blankets and bedsheets, baseball games and volleyball. We basically lived outside and used our imaginations. Then we’d gravitate over to the Aces High and ride horses or swim. Before the swimming pool was added, we had our swims in this wonderful natural spring-fed pool. It was a great place to grow up.”

“It sounds like you have wonderful memories of your childhood. Yet, you did leave after you became an adult? What brought you back here? It must have been a change after the big city hustle and bustle.”

“It was,” she agreed. “And I don’t regret leaving and experiencing another environment. It was fun and exciting at first. And I did enjoy my job in a much larger hospital setting. But it did become more stifling in a way as time progressed. Life began to seem stuck in fast mode. And when Brooke came along, I realized our time together wasn’t the quality I wanted for her. Perhaps my ill-advised marriage had something to add to that scenario, but there was a yearning I felt to return to where

there was more ‘time’ to take a deep breath, enjoy the people around you, and figure out that roots aren’t that bad after all. I wanted Brooke to know more about what heritage she was a part of... meet the friends and family that she would know to always be there for her. Breathe fresh air and have room to run and play and not be locked away inside an apartment without the feel of being barefoot in green grass or taking time to lie quiet in it and pick out animals in the clouds. Silly things like that, I guess. But I had underestimated how important all that was to my way of life as a child.” She stopped and smiled. “And all of that is the long way around to say it was time to come home and build one for my daughter and myself. And it was perfect timing that I could also find a position that I enjoyed at a very good hospital.”

He nodded. “I’ve come to realize that the feeling of ‘home,’ while I am not an expert in it myself, is something that can pull you to it and bond itself someplace deep within you, no matter how far you travel. It’s something that was elusive to me most of my life.

“But then, I did find that home can be something different for a lot of people. My feeling of home... belonging more so than anything, came not from blood relations, but from knowing people who truly cared and welcomed me into their lives at a time when I was pretty much disheartened and looking for that bond, I suppose... to tether to a place long enough to put my hopes and dreams into action. So, I truly can get what you mean, and I know Brooke will be the better for coming here and having these spaces to dream in—and to climb in.” He grinned at the prospect.

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“You know, I’ve given a bit of thought to Miss Brooke’s apparent need to seek out the heights above the ground. And I think I might have a solution to help divert her into a safer environment while still allowing her the need to climb.”

“You’ve done thinking about that issue?” Kenzie tried to not appear too surprised after what he just said.

“What would you say to her having a tree house? Over there,” he nodded toward a sprawling oak tree in the yard. “That tree has good strong structure in its limbs that are closer to the ground, with room to add an area upward once she is older. I have one in mind that I’ve been wanting to build, but don’t have a good tree to try it with. You’d be doing me a favor by allowing me to take out my stress on such a project... not to mention the new circular saw I’d like to try out.” He finished with a broad grin, and it was contagious.

“I’m totally surprised by this. It sounds like quite a project.”

“Not really. And if it makes her happy and keeps her in controlled airspace, all the better. Who knows? You might want one for yourself. And I hear they are great places to lie and watch the clouds from and the stars too.”

“Now that would certainly be a first for me. But it would be nice to channel her daredevil side into a safer habitat.” She still was a bit hesitant. He easily read her mind.

“And the really big cherry on top... I’ve got plenty of lumber, more than I could ever use, from some of my previous projects, and my labor is cheap. You know my price...

I work for food. Beat that deal.”

“I doubt I could ever beat that deal.” And it was clear he wasn’t about to let her change her mind, given how fast he moved to seal the agreement.

“Good. I’ll begin Saturday morning... early. And I suggest that Miss Brooke gets the news when I bring pizza over tomorrow afternoon and get her input in what she thinks is a must in her aboveground condo. Sound like a plan?”

Was he expecting her to decline? He was watching her as he took a sip from his glass. Okay, Jackie, here goes me going out on that limb...in more ways than one.

“You aren’t going to give me time to come up with a good enough excuse. Sounds like a plan. We accept, but with the caveat that any additional expense is discussed and I will cover that issue.” Somehow, she didn’t know which of them was the most surprised after the words came out. He stuck out his hand.

They shook on it, gaze upon gaze. His smile created a tingling in her middle. There was hunger, and then there was hunger...and she took back possession of her hand. “Extra cheese on that pizza, please.”

Chapter Eleven

The best-laid plans. Those words crossed his mind a few times. Deke had wasted little time clearing files from his desk the next day. By the time the afternoon began, he was pleased that he had taken the bold step and broached his idea of the tree house and went a step further in suggesting he supply pizza after they had finished work. The fact she had accepted without putting up more roadblocks had caught him by surprise. Deke was prepared to argue the point when she turned him down, but she had said yes. And maybe that was a sign he was making headway in building that bridge of trust.

He wasn't generally known to be patient, but he was having to practice it more and more. But today was going to be a good one. The sun was high in a bright-blue sky. The plan was that he and Brooke would have their lesson, then he would pick up the pizza and meet them at their house. Then the surprise of the tree house project would be unveiled.

The triple-digit temperature was going for the seventh day in a row. The rain earlier in the week didn't make a dent in the drought conditions. Already he had loaned two of his chopper fleet out to counties in the northern corner of the Texas panhandle to help evacuate people from devastating grass fires caused by flash lightning. It was another rough Texas summer.

The pool was going to feel good. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt such a positive high... and it had a lot to do with Kenzie and Brooke Calhoun. There was a feeling that maybe the past was being replaced with a new present... one where a spark of trust had been lit, much to his surprise. And it wasn't just in his case. He wanted to be the catalyst that could teach Kenzie that she could take that same step and let trust begin to build in her life again.

Then the phone call came. Beaudry was proposing they cook up some burgers, crank a couple of freezers of homemade ice cream, and turn it into a pool party... after the lesson, of course... and Jaxson and Laurel were on board. Sammi Jo and Lacy and baby Jeff were geared up. What did Deke think? It would be great to have the two Burkitt and Hawkes clans come together for the first time... and that certainly included Kenzie and Brooke.

What was the easiest way to tell him what he really thought of the idea? He had a nice evening planned for the three of them. But it would feel rude to throw that out there since it was Beaudry's pool that was their lesson site. And it was a good cause for celebration, he had to admit. Brooke would enjoy the other kids to play around in the pool with. So, he smiled and asked what he could bring. Evidently, Sammi Jo had

already brought Kenzie into the loop because she had texted him while he was packing the ice chest into the Jeep to let him know that it made sense for her and Brooke to go ahead and meet him at the pool. She was just finishing up the ice cream she had volunteered to bring. So she would see him there. She didn't sound disappointed. Had he hoped she would? Would have been nice for his ego.

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"This impromptu party was not my idea," Laurel spoke up to the woman beside her as Deke went to retrieve the ice cream maker from the back of Kenzie's car an hour later and was out of earshot. "My husband has no sense of timing on some things. This should be your time today."

"Please, don't be silly. Deke and Brooke will still get in some diving lesson time. And it's good that he has more time to socialize with his half brothers. They have some lost time to make up for. I don't mind."

"Then you're crazy." Laurel was not one to pull punches, but at least she did it with a grin on her face. "He's one fine-looking man, and he is definitely interested... so you need to go for it. What's stopping you?"

"One... I have a daughter to consider. I'm not going to throw a man into the mix just for the sake of it. Two... my last relationship taught me to be very cautious. I admit to trust issues. Three... probably the biggest hurdle for both of us is the fact he is my boss."

"One..." Laurel countered, "Brooke adores him already. And they are good together. Two... that relationship wasn't much of one at all and you didn't know he was a bad apple. But there are a lot of good ones left on the tree. Three... the hospital is your boss in actuality. Deke is merely a supervisor. Did you sign an agreement to not have certain thoughts and interactions with a mere coworker? I say you didn't, so put a big

X on that one. What else?”

Kenzie shook her head, setting her things on one of the sun loungers. “You amaze me. You always did as we grew up... the strange twists and turns in your thought processes. Downright scary at times.”

“You sound a lot like my sister... and my husband, come to think of it. I’m going to go inside and find another bottle of sunscreen. But you’ll thank me one of these days if you follow my advice.”

She watched Laurel meet up with Deke and Brooke at the patio doors. Her cousin held one open for him and then threw a wink in Kenzie’s direction. Save me from matchmakers.

She was not going to complicate the day with all sorts of downer thoughts and relationship woes. It was time to just breathe and enjoy an afternoon of fun and food.

That fun turned out to be more than just a little. Between the kids in the shallow end of the pool and the three bigger ones—the so-called adult men—in the deeper end, she was surprised there was much water left in the pool a couple of hours later. The males had begun a good-natured game of the biggest splash, biggest cannonball, best dive, and then just biggest belly-whopper. The tables were set and the food was ready... if Sammi Jo could get her husband out of the pool to tend the grill.

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That's when Beaudry hoisted himself from the pool to stand beside his wife with a smile that should have warned her, but her attention was on other things.

Suddenly, there was a loud yelp and a big splash.

"The ladies have been slaving away, guys. They need some cool-off time," Beaudry shared loudly. Jaxson didn't waste time. His preferred method was a fireman's over-the-shoulder carry, and Laurel had choice words for him when she came up spluttering.

Kenzie caught the glint in Deke's gaze, and that was a warning bell. She made a quick decision. Her cover-up went over her head and landed beside the table. While Deke was still in mid-hoist up the ladder, she was at a sprint to the springboard ladder. Up she climbed. Good idea? Bad idea, as she realized too late that her bravado might have been unwise, given the fact she hadn't dived for a while. The end of the board was coming up fast and she was committed. If she was going into the pool, she was doing it her way. One deep breath and one major push at the end, and then the cold water hit her.

It was automatic that she dove deep and then brought her legs beneath her to push herself off the bottom and power to the top. She broke the surface to claps and whistles. And one of those whistles was a deep-throated wolf kind. It was Deke who stood on the side of the pool with a look of amazement on his face, while she noted that there was another message in his dark-eyed gaze. She might have lived like a nun most of the time, but she had pulled out not only the surprise diving move, but the bright-emerald one-piece suit with its high cuts and low, low ones in back and front that made its own statement. Not bad for an old mom.

And why did she just do that? That was the next thought. No backing out. No running to grab the black cover-up. She tried to walk as sedately as she could from the shallow end and over to where she could grab a big beach towel to hide behind while she made a slow pretense of drying off.

“That was awesome, Mama!” Brooke was still wide-eyed and effusive with her amazement. “You know how to dive. We can practice together when I can go off the high board. Did you see, Mr. Deke? Did you know my mama could dive in?”

“I had no idea. Seems your mama is full of surprises we knew nothing about.” His gaze did a fast slide down and then back up, and Kenzie couldn’t help the warmth in her cheeks from responding. “How about grabbing a cold bottle of water for your mama?”

“Okay... be right back.”

They were alone and out of earshot of the others. “Quite nice. Any other surprises you might have planned for today? Any Olympic gold hiding in a closet? Paris runway experience?”

“My repertoire is depleted. I was surprised myself that I still got off the high board in one piece. Been a few years since I was the diving champion of my high school team. More than a few. I don’t advertise that.”

“Yet I’m the one giving your daughter diving lessons.”

“And you are doing so well at it.” She smiled. “Brooke asked you... and you looked like you were having so much fun. Keep up the good work.”

“I was right about you, Kenzie Calhoun. There are deep waters hidden away behind those sky-blue eyes. And the rest of you... well, there are all kinds of secrets you are

just now sharing. I need to keep a closer eye on you.”

She simply smiled. Things had notched up a bit. He reached for the towel as she evidently had dried as much as she could. With a little more confidence, she handed it over. He put it on the table and then, in a move as swift and smooth as lightning, she felt his arms go around her legs and middle and off her feet she went, accompanied by much laughter and applause as she went sailing through the air and landed on her backside in the pool... again. She spluttered to her feet, mopping the hair out of her eyes... that met a pair of very amused ones on the pool’s edge.

“Did you think you were going to get away with not being thrown in?” His response was a huge grin.

“Well, I guess we’re even.” She moved to the ladder and got a foothold. He reached down to help her, she grabbed hold of his wrist, planted her full weight on the metal rung, and used much the same technique of helping larger patients from their beds. She gave a good heave and caught him by surprise. He exchanged places with her in the water, which only made for bigger laughs from those watching. She climbed out and very gracefully bowed to the audience and then tossed Deke a towel as he stood in the water. “Yes, as you say, better watch those secret moves... I do own a few.” She took up her cover-up and headed in the direction of the pool house.

Maybe she had gone too far? When she came back sans swimsuit, but in shorts and a tank top, she found a quieter version of Deke had joined them. The meal had been great and the conversation amusing. After the leftovers had been tucked away in the kitchen, the kids retreated to the jungle gym and swings in the wide expanse of shaded lawn. Sammi Jo took little Jeff to the nursery. That left the rest of them to their sun loungers. Under the protection of dark lenses, she tried to spend time reading her book while also watching Brooke and Deke work on diving techniques. Lacy had joined them and laughter was heard now and then. All in all, a very pleasant Sunday afternoon.

“Nicely played.” Lauren’s comment came from the lounge beside hers.

“What is nicely played?”

“The fun and games in the pool earlier. Preceded by quite a reveal... of skill and swimwear choice. High marks for all of it.”

“Thanks, but I didn’t do it on purpose or for marks.”

“Right, and snow is expected by the end of this week. Anyway, you made a really BIG impression on a certain bachelor. And that’s what counts.”

“Again, amazing how your mind works,” Kenzie responded. “And I am not going to respond to your choice of superlatives, either.” She made a show of going back to her book but needed to add one more thing. “And since that time, he’s been quieter than normal. I think all I managed to do was dent a male ego.”

“Hon, you didn’t dent anything. You just helped pull the blinders off, I’d say. Now he has some decisions to make. Like his next move in stepping up his game.”

Stepping up his game. She left the book open on her lap, but her mind wasn’t on the words on the page. She wasn’t into games. Was that where he was? Had she given off the wrong message? Maybe she needed to explain herself. If they weren’t on the same page, then that could be a real problem. The breeze created chill bumps on her heated skin. It was time to bring the afternoon to a close.

“Brooke!” Her daughter and Deke looked in her direction. “We need to wind everything up and get home.” Naturally, that wasn’t what Brooke was in favor of, but Deke said something that brought the smile back, so they headed over to join the others.

In fact, her child was more docile than usual as she helped to pack up their swim bags and Deke carried the empty ice cream freezer to the car for them. Once everything was stowed away, Brooke climbed in the front seat, her eyelids showing signs of drooping after the rigorous energy expended in the water for the last few hours.

They paused at the closing of the trunk. She needed to set something straight. “Thank you for your help.”

“I’m just sorry that the maker is empty of that delicious ice cream. I’ve a new favorite in peach ice cream now. Maybe I could get you to make another round of it sometime.”

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“It’s possible. And thanks for being a good sport about the pool. Hope no ego was dented too much.”

“My ego is still intact. Thank you for being concerned about it.”

“I have other concerns, as well.”

“Such as?” He had grown serious.

“There’s a fine line often between work and play. Especially between boss and employee. I’m a firm believer in that. I think you are as well. I just don’t want to give off the wrong impressions... to anyone.”

Deke gave a half smile. It didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I hear that loud and clear. It’s obviously an area you feel strongly about. No need to worry. There aren’t any rules about friendship outside the office in our line of work. No need to add to stress levels. And I see that Brooke might have played herself out today. It might be better that we introduce the idea of the tree house plans Tuesday afternoon after the lesson. I’d still come over with pizza in hand.”

“Well, there’s tomorrow afternoon also. Unless you have plans.”

“I do. I promised to spend the day with a friend, and it’s been planned for a while.”

Kenzie nodded. “Of course, you do have a life and other plans. You’ve been generous enough as it is with your time for Brooke. And we haven’t mentioned the tree house idea to her yet, so we...”

He held up a palm. “No, that is still happening. It is a good idea and I’m looking forward to making it happen.”

“I won’t argue. I see the determination. Tuesday, it is.”

“Drive safe and sweet dreams.” He shut the door after she was seated.

His departing words had struck a memory chord, and she had to keep her mind on the task of backing out of the parking area and then keep her eyes from going to the rearview mirror as they drove away. Sweet dreams. If he only knew that for some reason, her dreams were anything but strictly sweet... especially since he’d begun starring in them.

Chapter Twelve

Monday morning was a Monday morning in true fashion. The birds were busy transporting and running trauma calls. They had flown to New Mexico twice that morning. And a few hundred miles to the south for a rock climbing injury. The winds had picked up, and on their last run, she was surprised to see a thickening cloud of dust rising in the east, turning into a shield between them and the lowered sun.

When she made note of it, the response from Deke came over her headset inside her helmet.

“That’s smoke moving in from the big wildfires in upper New Mexico and Arizona. That’s what three hundred thousand acres of burning brush and houses will do in a high wind.”

“That is amazing,” she responded. “We wouldn’t fly in something like that, would we?”

“You’d be a fool to try. Inside it, you are blind and your engines don’t respond too well to soot and particles picked up like debris. Wildfires are nothing to mess with in the air.”

That was fine with Kenzie. Some of her hardest transports had been burn victims and firefighters. But she hadn’t had to see the actual fires to know that she wanted no part of them.

Tuesday was only a little less hectic. Deke left the office ahead of her, reminding her that he would meet them at the pool. The lesson went as usual. Kenzie did spend some time inside the house visiting with Sammi Jo and baby Jeff. It was nice and she was glad that her cousin was not like her sister. The conversation did not mention a certain pilot or involve any sort of matchmaking advice. But neither did she share that Deke was coming over afterward and bringing dinner. The less on that subject, the better.

“Mama, is Ranger coming to dinner with Mr. Deke tonight?”

Brooke had been watching the minutes tick by on the big clock on the kitchen wall since they walked through the back door thirty minutes before. She had left long enough to shower and throw on a sleeveless top and shorts, and then she was back in the kitchen. Kenzie had taken just about as long to change into the off-the-shoulder, ruffled yellow top and white jean shorts. She let her hair stay loose, as did Brooke. Only Brooke had to add the pink sparkly headband for her signature color splash.

“He is always invited, so we shall see if Mr. Deke has decided if Ranger can come or not. Since he is bringing pizza tonight, how about we get busy and whip up some cupcakes for dessert?”

“Ooh, yes! Can I put icing on them?”

Kenzie began collecting the items needed and setting them out on the counter. Brooke pulled up the smaller step stool she often used in order to help and be the cook's helper. That included pulling an apron over her head that said just that.

"You are going to make them and I will talk you through it. How does that sound?"

"I'm the cook now! Do we have sprinkles? We have to have those."

Kenzie reached up in the cabinet and rummaged through spices and smaller bottles. She stepped back with the magic bottle of multicolored sprinkles.

"Yay!" Brooke grinned and took the bottle. In the next ten minutes, two pans of cupcakes were assembled and then placed in the oven.

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“Okay, Chef Brooke, you can’t stand there and stare at the oven. It doesn’t make it bake faster. So now, take this towel, and I’ll wash and you can dry the items we used. Always remember, a good chef cleans as she goes... it makes the job a lot easier, and your kitchen won’t look like a total disaster if you have guests.”

“I’ll remember, Mama. Can I cook breakfast too? I want to learn how to make pancakes.”

“Well, to use a swimming metaphor... you learn to paddle before you swim. We’ll work our way up to your pancakes.”

“With smiley faces?”

Kenzie dropped a swift kiss on top of her child’s head as she was intent on drying the plastic bowl on the cabinet. Moments like these were to be treasured and stored for the day when her little girl would have her own kitchen.

“Mama, are you crying? Did I dry something wrong?”

Kenzie shook her head and batted away the moisture that somehow had gathered in the corners of her eyes. “I think it’s my allergies today. The sunflowers are beginning to bloom in that field down the road we pass by in the car. Probably some of that is floating our way.”

Brooke nodded and went back to her concentration. But it was short-lived. At the sound of the doorbell, the towel and stool were left behind in her flying wake. Brooke was but a blur disappearing down the hall. Very soon after, the sound of muffled

voices met Kenzie's ears as she dried the last dish and was about to put it away.

"Come see, Mr. Deke," Brooke was saying, leading the way for their guests into the kitchen. Ranger came next and then Deke, his hands full of pizza boxes and a grocery sack. Kenzie stepped forward, hands outstretched.

"Give our guests time to unload his arms, Brooke. Let me help." She took the bag as he moved to set the two squares on the counter. His smile landed on her and she felt it all the way to her toes and back. Surely she wasn't blushing? She was too old for such things. It must be the heat of the kitchen's oven. That was her story and she grabbed on to it.

"Are you feeding an army I don't know about?"

"I might have gotten carried away," he said. "I'm not used to buying for more than one human in my house. I got the pizzas that Miss Brooke said were your favorites... pepperoni for her, Hawaiian with double cheese for you, and my meat and veggie overload." He laughed. "Of course, I thought a salad would also be called for... to keep things healthy."

"Are the cupcakes ready to come out of the oven, Mama?" Brooke was trying to stand on tiptoe and peer through the wall oven's glass.

"Let's check," Kenzie responded, reaching for an oven mitt. The smell permeated the kitchen, and the cupcakes were indeed ready. "Okay, let me put them on the cooling rack. Then we'll get the icing ready."

"And don't forget..."

"The sprinkles," both Deke and Brooke spoke at the same time, and that brought forth a high five to each other from the pair.

“Oh, dear.” Kenzie shook her head. “I don’t know if I can be in the same kitchen with two sprinkle fiends.”

“And that brings up another point,” Deke said, and he stepped forward with hand outstretched. Without pause, Kenzie supplied her hand in his. The contact was quite a zing, and he gave a wink. “Well, I was thinking more along the lines of you handing me over that apron you are wearing... but the hand is a far better choice.”

Now the color rose in her cheeks for certain. She withdrew her hand and reached for the apron strings at her back. “Apron?” She realized she wasn’t making the impression she wanted, but his presence was more unnerving than before. Or she was just aware of so much more about the tall man standing in her kitchen that seemed to have shrunk in size.

“Brooke informed me at the front door that she is an assistant chef now, so she and I shall take care of the preparation of this evening’s meal if you don’t mind allowing me to run amok in your kitchen?”

“That’s right, Mama. Mr. Deke and I will handle it all. You go and watch TV.”

“I might live to regret this, but no one has to ask me twice to go watch TV and let someone else handle the meal... this once.” She handed over the apron. And then she left the pair but paused at the doorway. “I’m leaving Ranger in charge over you both.”

“That’s good... he is a veteran at keeping the things that might get dropped on the floor all tidied up... great in the kitchen,” Deke responded with an innocent grin.

“Oh dear...” Kenzie said, turning and heading toward the living room. She picked up the book she had tried to finish a few times, but it was still a distraction of giggles, pots and pans clanging, mixer whirring, more giggles and laughter, and that all made

her sigh... and smile too. Brooke sounded carefree and happy. And that was how she had envisioned it to be over those years of growing up and even during the fateful marriage. A home with laughter and people happy and secure and... a family.

Had she been wrong to wall off the pair of them? She and Brooke were not going to need anyone else. That was the plan. But had she miscalculated? Had Brooke needed that father figure in her life? Was she, the single mom, not enough? Her daughter seemed happy enough, or maybe she had just seen it through rose-colored glasses? Things had been placed in a different perspective since the arrival of Deacon Hayes in their lives. She hadn't been prepared for him. Other males had suffered the chill of her rebuffs over the years. But why was he different?

He was everything she should have slammed the door against. But more and more she realized she had misjudged in lumping him in with the other males... with labeling him as just another "flyboy," ready to swoop in and break hearts and then disappear into the sky without a care in search of other hearts to conquer. Deke had surprised her. And that wall seemed to be losing its height with each passing day. Was it wise? That was the remaining question. And she couldn't find the answer she needed... not yet.

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Deke stepped back, arms folded, and Brooke took up much the same pose beside him. A pronouncement was at hand. On the cabinet, on a silver tray, were a dozen cupcakes. White cake insides, white fluffy frosting on top, and lots of sprinkles on top of all of it.

"I'm thinking these may be the best cupcakes I have ever seen," Deke said. "They are almost too pretty to eat. Maybe we shouldn't."

A slow moan escaped from Brooke beside him. "Really? But I bet they taste really,

really good too. It would be wasteful not to eat them. My mama says that we shouldn't waste food because we are lucky to have it and others might not. So we should eat them."

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Deke tried to stifle a grin, but it was hard to do around such a precocious and utterly enjoyable child. He was doubly glad that he had looked up that day in the cafeteria and saw her contagious smile being sent his way. She'd thought he needed some sprinkles to brighten his world. And she had been smarter than she could realize.

For the first time in many years, he began to feel that being part of the human race again wasn't so far-fetched. Maybe, just maybe, he could find that elusive trust that so many others took for granted. And then there was that odd feeling that had come along with those thoughts. He wanted to make Kenzie smile. She had a beautiful one, but it needed to be freed to be able to share it more with the world. Just because one bum male was a loser and could not see what he had in front of him—a loving wife and terrific little girl—and could throw it all so easily away, that didn't mean that another male wouldn't consider himself the most blessed man to have such a family.

“Mr. Deke, can't we show Mama and then eat one... or two?”

Back to the cupcake issue. “How about we surprise her? We will get the pizzas and salad ready, with plates and drinks and napkins on the table. Then, after dinner, you will surprise her and then we will eat them.”

“Goody!” She clapped. “She'll be really surprised.”

Brooke was correct. She went into the living room twenty minutes later and announced that dinner was ready. She took her mama by the hand and announced that she was escorting her to the dining room. Then she amended with, “It's not really the dining room. It's the table in the kitchen, but it's okay because it's pizza night.”

Kenzie was surprised. The kitchen table had been transformed with a red-and-white picnic cover that had been buried in the pantry for months. A candle in a makeshift holder... an old soda bottle... with a long red taper saved over from the holidays sat in the center of the table. Red plastic plates and matching red napkins had been in the sack of groceries. The pizzas and a bowl of salad were on the table, along with two glasses of iced tea and one of milk. As they approached, Deke stepped behind a chair and pulled it out, ready to seat her as an honored guest.

“I can’t believe this,” she said. “You two definitely have surprised me and I can see you worked very hard. I think I am spoiled, and now I need chefs in the kitchen all the time.”

“Well, I don’t know if you can afford us... Chef Brooke and I don’t come cheap.”

The meal was perfect, even if it was pizza. It was the company that made it special, and the conversation was punctuated with Brooke’s giggles and Deke’s easy teasing... and his ever-present attentiveness to her... making certain that she had salad and pizza and refills on her tea. It had been a while since she wasn’t the one making certain the food was hot, the drinks had refills, and then there would be the cleanup.

“Is it time? For dessert, Mr. Deke?” Brooke had been waiting for that portion of the meal from the beginning.

“Almost. I think there is something that we need to do first,” Deke said. “But we need to go outside for this surprise. Shall we, ladies?” He stood and they followed. Brooke was a little crestfallen at the change in plans. But she followed the pair onto the front porch. She sat on one of the chairs while Deke took a long cylinder from just inside the door where he had left it when he arrived. He took a roll of paper from the inside and smoothed it out on the tabletop.

“What is that Mr. Deke?” Brooke sat closer, her gaze on all the lines and numbers,

and then she stopped. Her eyes went straight to him. “That looks like what’s in Lacy’s yard at Aces High.”

“Well, this one is a bit bigger. It has a lot of room because the tree is much bigger.” Deke watched her reaction.

“Tree? Is Lacy getting a bigger tree house? Are you building it?”

“No, this isn’t a tree house for Lacy. Yes, I am building it. I was thinking I could build it in this yard... if you think there is someone here who might like to climb into it and leave other trees alone?”

“Here? I could climb that ladder and I could play in it. I wouldn’t have to climb trees anymore. I promise I wouldn’t if I had a tree house of my own like this one! Please, Mama?”

“That would need to be our agreement,” Kenzie said. “No more climbing trees or anything else that takes you off the ground. If you can’t promise that, then we don’t need to have Mr. Deke spend his time doing this.”

“I promise, Mama. I really do promise, Mr. Deke. Can I help you build it?”

Deke took a few long moments deep in consideration... or giving it his best imitation of it. “So, have you experience building tree houses?”

Brooke slowly shook her head, the bottom lip in evidence, and those eyes were purple puddles waiting to be turned on. Deke was a pushover. He grinned and nodded. “I’ll take you on as a helper on a trial basis.”

A huge grin lit up her eyes, and the next question was a given. “When will it be ready?”

Kenzie shook her head and met Deke's gaze. "Good luck with that one. You'll hear it many, many times." She smiled sweetly.

"I can see that the Calhoun ladies are going to make this project very interesting."

"That might be quite an understatement," Kenzie responded. "Hope you can handle the job."

"Don't underestimate me when I am motivated." That sapphire gaze held a glint of challenge but also a sizzle of spark that took aim at the center of her chest. There was an undeniable feeling that some corner had been turned, and they had taken the first steps on a path whose end was too shrouded in fog to see.

Chapter Thirteen

Underestimate or overestimate? She wasn't sure which it might be the most of, but Deke Hayes was a man on a mission and he was determined. What the impetus was behind it all, she wasn't exactly sure, but it had to have a six-year-old dynamo taskmaster involved. Still, she had warned him. And that was why she felt no commiseration for him when he would make a call to the lumberyard on his break between flights or search out this part or that one when he couldn't find it locally. He'd catch her amused smile and he could read it quite clearly.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you." Not a question, but a statement of fact.

"Actually, I find this might be a lot like that reality television show. Although you aren't on a beautiful tropical island, you are learning the basics of the competition... you are an adult having to figure out how to outlast, outwit, and eventually outplay a highly intelligent six-year-old taskmaster. Good luck with that." Then she gave him another smile and left him to his list.

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Two days later, Deke had taken the bull by the horns and called in troops. That included Jaxson and Beaudry. Sammi Jo and Laurel even brought food to grill... burgers and the fixings. Dawson and Tallie were there too. Sawing and hammering and good-natured ribbing filled the air of the late-afternoon project.

Kenzie brought out more sodas and water bottles for the ice chest on the front porch. Deke saw her and made a quick move to open and add the ice bags.

“Thanks,” she said, and her gaze swept over the scene. “Called in the troops finally. Smart move. Of course, your foreman over there is watching to make certain there isn’t anyone shirking their duties.” They both took in the sight of Brooke, a hard hat in bright yellow on her head... perched on a stepladder and foot tapping as she watched the structure going upward.

“Can I help it that this neighborhood is a very friendly place and people naturally want to help?”

“Along with bribing with food and cerveza and even getting Dawson out here to do some of his amazing culinary work on the burgers he usually serves up at the restaurant. A little outmaneuvering, I see. In it to win it, aren’t you?”

“I am going to pretend that I do not hear that sarcasm in the undertones,” Deke responded, grabbing a couple of swift swigs of water. “This isn’t a contest. At least not in the usual sense.”

“The usual sense? Care to expand?”

“It’s me testing my own abilities to rebuild trust... not just for my sake, but others too. Now I am getting that look from our Crew Chief, Brooke. Back to work I go.”

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Kenzie went back to helping in the kitchen, but her mind was on Deke’s words and the underlying message in his gaze when he spoke about rebuilding trust. And not just for himself, but others. Who would the “others” be? Why did she think he meant her situation? Or was she just being silly? Or hopeful? Hopeful, where a guy was concerned? That thought shocked her.

“You realize that you just filled the saltshaker with sugar, right?” Sammi Jo pointed out the fact while Laurel did her best to keep a straight face.

“We get it... hard to concentrate sometimes. What with all those muscles and tanned skin... jeans and white tee shirt, giving that ‘bad boy’ vibe. He even sweats sexy.”

“Laurel... reminding you that you are an old married lady and your husband is out there and should be the only one you are noticing.”

“Relax, dear sister... I am a happily married, not old, lady. But I’m not blind.”

“Okay, both of you. I made a simple mistake between white sugar and white salt. Let’s get the food on the tables on the porch so we can feed everyone.” Kenzie used the time while the two sisters were kidding back and forth to clear thoughts out of her brain that Deke had planted there. One step at a time... one day at a time. That was her best advice to herself.

With the added help, the tree house was declared finished. The others had to leave, so it was the three of them to “christen” the tree house. Deke had placed a bright-pink ribbon across the open door archway, and Brooke was dancing up and down with

excitement. There was a ladder that had handrails and it was sturdy, and she made quick work of scrambling up it and then declaring it was the best tree house in the world. It earned a major hug around his neck. Moisture was gathering in Kenzie's eyes.

"It's time to get ready for another day tomorrow, Brooke. Tell Deke another huge thank you and then good night. You'll have more time tomorrow to enjoy your new space."

Reluctantly, Brooke gave another hug to Deke and one to Ranger, then Kenzie. "I'll come tuck you in shortly and listen to prayers."

"Okay, Mama. This was the best day ever."

That left the two of them... and a dog that laid down and watched with somewhat sad eyes as the small figure disappeared inside the house.

Kenzie turned and saw that Deke had taken a seat on the top step of the tree house. She moved to take the space beside him. The sun was slowly slipping behind the hills and peace was settling in around them. She hugged her knees to her chest, chin resting for a moment on them. The warmth from the person beside her seemed to filter into her spirit, and it was very nice to welcome it. No walls pushing back.

"You know you have made one little girl supremely happy. I can't thank you enough because it is such a huge thing to her... and to me. We've never had such thoughtfulness. I know you don't want me to mention it again, but it just seems that you should..."

His palm went up. "Do not finish that sentence. No payment is expected for a gift. It helped me to destress these last few days. And seeing smiles... from you both... is more than enough, so let's drop that subject."

“Dropped... but never forgotten,” she added, and received an arched look from him. Then that smile slowly appeared and all was well. He noted the quiet world beneath their perch.

“I’d say this is a perfect evening... Brooke might have something here about seeing the sunset from the branches of a tree.”

“She might at that. But now, her mother might not get as many gray hairs as she grows up... at least not from her climbing skills.”

“Well, I have a confession to make. Just keep in mind that you know how much of a charmer your daughter can be.”

That caught her attention and she returned his gaze. “Which little finger did she have left to wrap you around? And what did she wrangle this time?”

“I might have promised... in return for her help and being such a good pupil in her classes in the pool and all... how could I resist when she asked if she could see where her mother worked?”

“She’s been to my office at the hospital lots of times.”

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“Not that office... the one that flies off to help people, as she put it. I might have promised her she could see it. And... I might have promised her a ride in my helicopter next Saturday... if she graduates and aces her diving test on Thursday. You are the judge of that, by the way.”

“As if her own tree house is not enough of a graduation present?”

“Nope... doesn’t count since it also was for my mental benefit, as well.”

“The two of you together might be a scary team I have to watch out for in the future.”

His gaze softened in the fading sunset’s glow. He cupped the back of her head and leaned forward slightly. His tongue peeked out as he subtly licked his lips. “I like the wordsteamandfuturewhen they come from you. I hope you’ll use them more often. And now, I am aware there is a small face that has been glued to a certain window upstairs for the last five minutes, watching us from her perch. As much as I would really like to take advantage of this moment, I think the best thing is for me to say good night, help you down from this perch, and be on my way.”

She had to hope he couldn’t hear how loudly or fast her heart was beating in that moment. He had been about to kiss her. And she would have let him. Instead, when he offered his hand, she took it, and he led the way down from the lofty new addition. He didn’t let go of her hand as they walked to his vehicle, not until they reached it, and he had to place the last of his tools inside the back. Then he turned, and with a glance to the window, he waved. There was one returned.

“Sweet dreams, Kenzie.” His warm gaze only left hers when he headed the Jeep

down the driveway. When her head hit the pillow later that evening, that was indeed what she had.

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On Thursday, she was surprised to find that Deke had a pilot subbing for him. She hoped he wasn't ill or whatever. Her disappointment in simply not seeing his smiling face around the office was an indication to her that she might be headed faster down that slope.

And then she worried. It wasn't like him to miss any time. It was compounded when she was the only one showing up for a pre-planned lunch date at Coffee, Chat and Etc. with her cousins and Tallie. Tallie met her at the table with a couple of tall, iced tea glasses. "I put your order in already and it should be out in a moment. Looks like it's you and me today."

"What's up with Laurel and Sammi Jo?"

"It's all hands on deck, evidently, out at the Aces High. In fact, I hear your boss is out there, too, lending a hand with the work crews."

"Work crews? What gives?"

"It's all these wildfires. They have regular fire breaks along the fence lines of the Aces High... that is usual. But it seems they want to add some more reinforcements and dig a few more emergency water holes that they are going to truck in some water for. You can't be too careful. Some of the big ranches out west learned the hard way recently that they hadn't prepared enough. Sammi Jo and Jaxson always go an extra mile. That means they need extra hands to drive bulldozers, road graders, and move fire equipment to different areas. It's precautionary."

“I don’t even want to think what a fire could do out there with all the barns and buildings and livestock,” Kenzie said, feeling a shudder go through her.

“Don’t worry. It’s just better to be safe than sorry. Lives have been lost in flash wildfires in recent years, as I’m sure I don’t need to tell you in your line of work. Let’s talk about something pleasant. Did you know that Alma’s got a whole new line of the cutest skirts coming in this week? I can’t wait to get some new fashion ideas.” The rest of the meal had been about light stuff and she returned to the hospital, but also hoped that Deke was staying safe with whatever he was doing to help his family out. It wasn’t a surprise when the text had come in later that he was having to cancel out on the usual pool lessons. It had been brief and she texted back that she understood. And ended with a “stay safe” admonition.

Friday came, and when Kenzie entered the staff office, her heart fell. The substitute pilot was there, going over the day’s flights, and no sign of Deke. Kenzie quickly found out that Deke was going to be out another day. And that made it a possibility that he might not be able to keep their plans for Saturday. She needed to be ready to break the news to Brooke, who had circled the date on the calendar on their refrigerator and made an X with a red crayon as each day passed. Yes, she would be very disappointed. Kenzie didn’t take time to explore her feelings on the subject.

They had finished dinner, and Brooke had been a big help, placing the plates and silverware into the dishwasher. Kenzie topped it off with glassware and pots. She added the soap, locked the door into place, and Brooke pushed the buttons. She switched off the light.

“I’m going to brush my teeth, Mama, and then pick out my outfit for tomorrow.” She had made it to the second step when Kenzie called her back. “Let’s you and I sit down for a minute. We need to talk about tomorrow.” There had been no word from Deke, one way or another, so she needed to let Brooke know that a change of plans was at hand.

“I promise to behave tomorrow, Mama. I’ll use my best manners.”

“I know you will, sweetheart. But you also...” The phone rang. She looked at the cell phone and it was Deke. “I need to take this, so go on up and brush your teeth and get ready for bed. I’ll be up there soon.”

Kenzie clicked on, and the sound of Deke’s voice on the other end dissolved the knot in her stomach. “Hello.”

“Hi, sorry if I’m calling too late. But it’s the first chance I got today.”

“No problem. Brooke’s getting ready for bed. I know you’ve been really busy helping out at the Aces High and Hawkes’s Ranch.”

“I wanted to let you know that we’re still on for tomorrow... unless you two ladies have changed your mind.”

“You know better than that. Brooke can’t get more excited. She probably won’t sleep at all tonight.”

“That’s great. And you? I hope you might be looking forward to it also.”

“Of course.” Why would he be asking if she looked forward to getting a tour of the machine she spent a good deal of each workday inside? It wasn’t going to be that much of a thrill, but it was the thought that counted, and Brooke would be happy.

“Good. I’d pack swimsuits, just in case we find a swimming hole as we fly around. We can leave after breakfast at the Coffee, Chat and Etc. Plan to be gone most of the day. I might need to make a stop or two to handle a bit of business. But Brooke should get a good intro to flying.”

“We’ll be ready.”

“See you at eight. Sweet dreams.”

Kenzie found she was getting used to having someone tell her to have sweet dreams before she went to sleep. That wouldn't be good to get too used to such things. They could be short-lived, especially when there were too many reasons for it not to work. That doubting devil was trying its best to come out and sit on her shoulder and whisper doubts, and she knew it was because, for the first time in a very long time, she was taking a chance. Trust was the angel on her other shoulder, and she had to get used to it again. And that made the other disappear in a poof of smoke.

Chapter Fourteen

“Hold still, please. I am almost done, but if you keep bouncing around, I won't get this bow tied.”

“Okay, Mama. But we need to hurry. Mr. Deke will be here soon. Where are we going to go fly?”

“I have no idea. Mr. Deke is the pilot. Wherever we go, you'll have fun.”

The doorbell sounded. “He's here! Come on, hurry... he's here.”

Brooke opened the door, her excitement evident. “You're here. We're ready to go flying.”

“I see you are. I like that airplane on your shirt with red and blue sparkles. Very nice.”

“I have new red shorts too. And I have sparkles on my blue shoelaces too.”

“I’d say you are definitely dressed to fly.” He stepped through the doorway and met Kenzie coming down the hall. She had a large beach bag and a shoulder bag. He took the beach bag from her. “And your mother is dressed to fly too. Much nicer than the usual work jumpsuit. Maybe we should look into updating our fashions. And we better go. Looks like Brooke will be keeping us on schedule today.”

Kenzie was glad she had chosen a belted jumpsuit... white sleeveless top, gold buttons, and wide-legged navy-blue pants. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and secured it with a bright-red scarf. And she had to admit that the man on her doorstep today did not resemble Deke in his usual flight suit. He wore a cream, long-sleeved dress shirt, with a dark-brown leather belt that matched the dark leather of his shined cowboy boots, and tan slacks pressed with creases. The cologne was an expensive one she recognized from the perfume counter at the mall. Impressive and unexpected described him.

“Can’t Ranger come today?” Brooke noted right away as she settled into the back seat of the Jeep that her fur pal wasn’t part of the excursion. Deke settled a cream Stetson on his head. With his aviator glasses in place, Kenzie felt her pulse rate speed up at the transformation. Not bad at all.

Kenzie noted that Deke made sure Brooke’s seat belt was secured and then flipped the lock on the door as he shut it. She liked that he took steps to keep her child safe. Another plus in the already multi-checked plus column. “Sorry, little one,” he replied to Brooke, sliding behind the wheel. “He has to earn his keep by being a guard dog today.”

They were soon off. Kenzie tried to not notice the interested looks that met them as they walked into the Coffee, Chat and Etc. a few minutes later. The morning crowd would be slow in coming in on the Saturday morning, so odds were they would be

done and on their way before the number of gossips multiplied. Tallie's eyes widened when she saw them, and then Kenzie doubted she had imagined the quick wink that she caught as Tallie greeted them and showed them to the back table where their group usually sat. Kenzie was grateful. They wouldn't be on display as much as in the front part of the café.

"Don't you look pretty today, Miss Brooke? Special plans?" She poured the coffee for the grown-ups and handed over the small glass of chocolate milk that was the child's usual order at breakfast.

"We're going flying! Mr. Deke is taking us."

"I'm sorry," Kenzie spoke up. "I don't think you two have met. Tallie Mayhew is the owner of this great establishment and a dear friend. Tallie, this is Deacon Hayes, the leader of our helicopter unit." Deke stood and shook the woman's hand. Kenzie recognized the effect... Tallie had just become a card-carrying fan.

"Glad to meet you. The community is certainly glad you're here. What can we get you all to eat this morning?"

They turned in their orders and the food arrived quickly. Kenzie knew that she would be grilled at the weekly lunch meeting by Tallie and the others. Brooke fairly danced ahead of them out of the restaurant and back into the Jeep. The office and hangars were on one side of the airfield on the Aces High. They were the only ranch in a two hundred-mile radius with an airfield, hangars, and a high-tech radar system. They were more than happy to have Deke's choppers use their facilities that were already in place for their Gulfstream.

Kenzie expected to see one of the regular helicopters ready and on the tarmac. But there was a sleek silver-and-gray jet helo, which was probably something to do with the ranch. Deke gathered the bags from the back and then led them away from the

hangar and straight to the other helicopter. A door slid back and a tall, gray-headed pilot came down the steps, wearing black slacks and a crisp white shirt with captain's bars.

He took the bags and moved to store them in a side compartment.

Kenzie was confused. "I thought we were going in one of your choppers... not our rescue one, but a regular one."

"Technically, you could call this one regular," he said with a grin. "This is the one that helps me get from point A to point B while conducting business. It's also one of my executive charters for businessmen with little time and far distances to go in a hurry. It's a lot more comfortable too. Our usual work helo is needed today with the others to help out with some of the counties with wildfires." He looked at Brooke, who was quieted into amazement. "How about it, little missy? You want to see the inside?"

Instead of a bank of life-saving machines and gurney space, there were high-backed cream-leather seats for six people, thick carpeting in a light gray, and wood paneling that shined to match the gleaming metallic trim. Kenzie was impressed and surprised, combined. Deke had dropped a jump seat from the wall just behind the pilot's seat and helped Brooke get buckled into it. He situated a pair of headphones and plugged them into an overhead system, explaining that would be how she would hear them talk and she could talk too. Then he held out his hand to Kenzie and helped her into the copilot's seat. She belted in, and he slid into his pilot's seat and began the pre-flight.

"The other pilot isn't going?"

"He brought her down here and he'll take her back later. Ready to go?"

Brooke nodded and, as the craft began to move and then lift, landing gear folding up into its belly, her eyes grew as round as saucers and she laughed with gleeful happiness. The questions began. Deke's patience was unbelievable. He answered them all... trying to make them less technical for the child's understanding, but Kenzie had to wonder which one—the child or the adult—was having the most fun.

Their interchange gave Kenzie time to do her own reflecting. What did she really know about the man beside her? He was an ex-military helicopter pilot who had a mentor that developed into a business. He was a jilted fiancé with trust issues not unlike her own. And he was her boss... at least for another four weeks. Brooke easily felt he hung the moon. And she was very much afraid that could be the case for her too. There was a part of her that had come alive in the last few weeks... a part she had walled off and barred entrance to others. But more and more, she found herself wanting to open that door, dust off the cobwebs, and take a chance. Was he the reason for it all? Today was not the day to search for answers, just to breathe and relax for a little while. She would let the day lend itself to whatever. Her smile grew from the inside outward.

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“Check out below. What animals are those, Brooke?” He asked the question as he gently banked the craft to the right.

“Look, Mama! Those are really buffalo! Just like in the movies.”

“I see. Isn’t it great? Imagine whole herds like that across the land. It must have really been a sight to see,” Kenzie responded. She felt her child’s enthusiasm was becoming contagious.

“I hope nothing happens to them.” Brooke was young, but she had a gentle, “old soul” quality, particularly when it came to living creatures.

Deke nodded. “This is a protected herd. They live on parklands along the canyons. They’re safe and here for everyone to see and enjoy.”

They banked to the left and the colors of the canyon walls came into view. The sunlight brought them into stark beauty. They rose slowly, and before long, the glint of sunlight shone off a river running over rocks, creating white water. And above it, on a higher outcropping of the rim, a low-slung adobe-walled dwelling sat. There was an obvious helicopter landing pad a few hundred yards from the house.

“Welcome to my quiet escape, ladies.” He sat the craft down with expert precision and the engines wound down. He turned to help Brooke unbuckle from her harness.

“This is your house?”

“It is my house, where I go to get my perspective on things in the quiet spaces.

Today, I thought you might like to have a picnic lunch here and have some sun in a really great natural swimming spot. Sound like fun?"

"Super! I can practice my diving too."

"Yes, you can. In fact, it's graduation time. Let's go have some fun, ladies."

Brooke skipped ahead of them up the stone path toward the adobe walls with an iron gate set into them.

"You're quiet," he observed, eyeing the woman beside him. What was she thinking? He had hoped to introduce her to a glimpse of his real life. She was silent, her gaze taking in her surroundings. Did it please her? It was a part of his world that he rarely shared with anyone.

"I'm just taking in the beauty of all of this. And trying to associate it with a person I thought I knew a little bit about, but obviously, just as you said once, you also have some layers to you that people don't often see."

"True."

He punched a code into the box next to the gate and it opened.

"How beautiful," Kenzie remarked, her gaze moving over the bright-colored pots of flowers and flowering shrubs. Red chilis hung in strands and climbing vines of purple and pink and white flowers contrasted with the pale pink of the adobe. One wall was almost entirely ablaze with the bright oranges and reds of trumpet vines. A soft tinkling of water came from a fountain feature set into an alcove, where benches invited someone to sit and relax in the shade. Butterflies were enjoying the potted plants along the stone walkway. It was a magical garden setting, and the pleasure of it shone in the blue eyes as she turned her gaze on him after taking it all in. "It is such a

perfect place. And you live here and can bear to leave it?”

“I return here as often as I can. It’s my escape, as I said. Come inside and see the rest.”

The rest was an extension of the outdoors. Terrazzo tile floors alternated into shining wooden ones. Huge carpets of brilliant Native American and Spanish designs were laid out where deep cushioned couches and chairs invited conversations. Pottery in sienna and deep-blue colors mixed with paintings that brought the area’s heritages indoors. Landscapes of cowboys, herds of mustangs, and Native American portraits adorned walls. And all along the back of the main room, floor-to-ceiling glass-paned wooden doors could be opened onto yet another patio, but this one had lower walls and the view drew Kenzie’s steps automatically. Deke opened the door and she stepped through, standing in amazement. The house sat on the rim of a canyon, and across from there was a horizon that was endless.

“I can only imagine what a sunset looks like from here. It feels like you could see all the way to California.”

Deke smiled. “It does feel that way at times. The world is infinite and just beyond the far horizon. I’ll have to make sure you get to enjoy the sunset soon. But right now, I see Miss Brooke is anxious, so I’ll show you where you can change into your suits while I gather the food in the kitchen.”

Down a curving hallway, with doors to the left and right, he opened one and stood back. The room was just as the rest of the house... beautiful. From the large four-poster gleaming wood of the bed with bright quilts to the heavier furnishing of antique-looking chests and mirrors, complete with its own bank of windows and a small patio. A large en suite bathroom was through another set of doors.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it and meet you in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

He headed toward the opposite end of the house, stopping just long enough in the master suite to change into his swim trunks and a pair of jean shorts, and grab a tee shirt in place of his dress shirt. Boots were exchanged for water shoes. He grabbed a couple more items as he passed the hall closet, and then he smiled. He was opening a special place, showing Kenzie a part of himself that he had always guarded. It felt right. And he could only hope she would realize what it meant for him to do so. She needed trust in her life. And that needed to begin with him showing her that he was taking that step. He hoped she could do the same. Failure was not an option for him. Hope was replacing the old fears.

Chapter Fifteen

Deke led the way down a winding path of stepping stones. Kenzie was glad for the wooden hand railing on one side as it was a bit steep in places. Brooke followed behind, still in gleeful anticipation of the adventure they had embarked upon.

“I promise, ladies, this is well worth the climb down,” he threw over his shoulder, the bags in one hand and the picnic hamper in the other.

“It isn’t necessarily the climbing-down part I have in mind... it’s the climbing back up that might be a little bit harder,” Kenzie made the laughing rejoinder. But she had to admit it was also an exciting adventure spirit that had crept into her mind too.

Then another sound besides laughter caught her attention. Rushing water. And it grew louder.

The source was visible as they rounded a rock outcropping and Brooke’s amazed “Wow” said it all. A tall cascade of gushing water poured over a cliff face about sixty feet above them. The path itself was continuing straight under the falling water. It was such that they could still walk on the path and not get too wet, except for a light spray caught on the breeze now and then. The sound was loud once they went under

it and then they came out on the other side, and below them was a shelf of rock under about a foot of rushing water... Kenzie guessed it was a limestone bedrock. That flowed into a deeper channel of blue with larger areas of rocks creating white water. And farther down, the rushing eased into flowing and then into a deep pool of sapphire, where a rope swing hung over it, and a flat stone created a natural diving space. It was an oasis one never expected to find.

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The trio came to a halt as they took it all in. “Well, will this do for our picnic?”

She and Brooke looked at the man with an incredulity evident on their faces, and he laughed. “I am thinking that would be a sound yes response. Let’s get our blanket and hamper set up, and then we will test that water out.”

The blanket was spread under the branches of a couple of tall cypress trees. And the picnic was more like a country feast, in Kenzie’s estimation.

“Okay, we have cold fried chicken, potato salad, chips and dips, and... some PB&J sandwiches that might interest a certain young lady. For dessert, well, we’ll keep that a surprise until Mama is pleased with your clean plate.” He grinned at Brooke. “Bottled water is in the cooler bag.”

“I think it’s best to eat, then we’ll see about that water.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed with Kenzie. “Let’s dive in... the food, not the water,” he corrected, and Brooke burst into laughter. Kenzie had to join in. Deke was being quite a host, and the laughter was extra special.

Several minutes later, Brooke had demolished the PB&J sandwich and chips and eyed the covered container at the edge of the blanket. “I cleaned my plate.”

“So you did.” Kenzie smiled, knowing where the conversation was headed next. “I suppose you might be full... too full for dessert right now?”

“I have a little room, Mama. And I cleaned my plate.”

Deke was grinning to himself but staying neutral.

“Well, you might need that extra strength, I suppose, for all that swimming that is planned. Perhaps Mr. Deke will share what he brought in that container, if you ask nicely.”

Deke wasted no time in reaching for the red plastic. “It would have been nice to have a watermelon, I thought... since picnics and watermelon go together.” Brooke’s smile slipped, but then she remembered, and it came back into place. Watermelon was better than no dessert at all.

“But then I thought,” he continued, “that my guests deserved better than just watermelon. So here we go.” The lid came off and there were a half dozen cupcakes, replete with the favored white buttercream icing and lots of bright-pink sprinkles on their tops. Brooke’s grin said it all. “My sprinkle buddy couldn’t be without sprinkles today,” he said. She chose one. “And in case our other guest isn’t into all that gooey stuff, like we aficionados of sprinkles are, these cookies here in this other container might be better to her liking.”

Kenzie sat looking at the smaller bowl’s contents. Her favorite cookie of them all... and he knew it, and the fact he knew it at all, and that he had made sure to provide it... well, it made her tear up a bit. Which she hastily batted away as if a fly had bothered her.

“Perfect. My favorite.” She chose one. Then her gaze met his and he smiled. A beautiful smile. And she felt it was a smile she would remember for a very long time. He hadn’t handed her a dozen red roses but a simple little plastic bowl of her favorite Oatmeal Ranger cookies. Because he was Deke. And that last bit of wall crumbled away. Over something so simple, yet so special, if only to her.

“Can we go now? Can we get in the water?” Brooke was clearly ready. Deke reached

into another bag. “I grabbed these swim shoes yesterday, thinking they might come in handy today as some of the rocks can be slippery and sharp. I guessed at the sizes... hope I got close enough.”

“I got bright-pink ones, Mama.”

“I see. I guess Mr. Deke might know you and your favorites by now. And you say?”

“Thank you, Mr. Deke. I really like them. Now can we go get in the water?”

“You two go ahead,” Kenzie said. “I want to put some of these leftovers away and then I’ll come join you.”

“We can practice my diving before my test.” Brooke had taken Deke by the hand as if it was the most usual occurrence, and he followed along. Soon there were splashes and laughter echoing along the canyon walls.

For a while, Kenzie was content to sit in the warmth of the sun and watch the pair. Whatever conversations they had seemed to end in fits of laughter. She couldn’t help thinking how perfect if all days could be like this one day.

“Watch, Mama! I’m going to jump in with Mr. Deke. Then I’m going to float.”

She waved her response. The splashes were huge and the water was calling to her. She stood up and pulled her cover-up off. Making sure her swim shoes were secure, she edged toward the water’s shallows.

“It’s better to jump in, Mama. It’s cold at first, but then it gets warm.” Her daughter was giving advice, and Kenzie debated which way to go. She dipped a toe in, and it wasn’t only cold, it felt frigid on her warm skin. There was only one way to go and that was to go into the deeper water and get it over. The pair watched her, words of

encouragement coming her way.

“You aren’t chicken, are you, Mama? I jumped in. Do you need Mr. Deke to jump with you?”

“Who is a chicken?” Kenzie spoke the words braver than she felt. But it was then or never. She closed her eyes and dove. And then her eyes were wide open. And so was her mouth, which was a mistake, and she came up coughing. Deke’s arm was around her in nothing flat and she was grateful. But a little embarrassed at her novice mistake. The shock of the water’s chill had been automatic.

“You okay? You might want to remember to not drink the water as you go in next time,” he offered up the sage advice. It was a good thing she noted the teasing glint in his eyes.

“I think I’ve got that. Thanks.” It was also interesting to realize that neither one of them had broken their contact. She was quite content to allow him to steady her in the deep water. And he obviously felt the same.

“Thank you for what is already an incredible day. And for being so good and patient with a precocious six- going on sixteen-year-old little girl. She has so many questions.”

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“She is amazing. And keeps me on my toes. You’ve done one incredible job of raising a genuinely great kid. Thanks for letting me get to know her. I hope you know that... well, I think you and I have some things to talk about when we can find some adult time. Maybe dinner next week?”

“I’m thinking we might be on the same page. Dinner would be nice. I can cook.”

“As much as I know you’re a great cook, I want to take you out. Someplace really nice. You deserve it.”

“Okay. I won’t argue.”

“Hey guys! I want to go play on the rope swing.” And there was their reminder that “alone” time would have to wait.

“Your wish is my command, Miss Sprinkles.” He gave her a wink and then left her to work on the proper rope swing technique for the next half hour. Kenzie tried her hand at it once and then said it was time for her to claim a seat on the bank and be their audience. In actuality, it turned out that she had a little catnap while they played.

“Hey, Ms. Judge over there... wake up! It’s time to give this girl her final exam on diving.” Deke’s voice woke her and she realized Brooke’s big moment had come. She knew her daughter, and she could see a mixture of uncertainty and a lot of bravado.

“I’m ready. Take your time and remember all Deke has taught you.”

That brought a nod and then a deep breath. The child laced her toes on the edge of the rock outcropping, arms up in place, and determination took over. The splash was a slice into the water, and Brooke came up with a huge grin. She looked immediately over to her mama.

Kenzie stood and gave resounding applause. “That was a ten! Way to go! You are now a diver.”

Deke added his clapping and a whistle or two. “Way to go, Miss Sprinkles!”

And then the diving continued.

An hour later, the sun was at the top rim of the canyon and sliding down enough to cast shadows that cooled the air quite a bit. And it was a sad fact that their time was drawing to a close. Packing up, it was time to begin the return trek up to the top of the canyon. And it was a challenge, as Kenzie expected. They had played hard and energy was in short supply. If the canyon wall had been a few feet taller, she wasn’t sure she wouldn’t have given up and just told them to leave her behind. Brooke even had thrown in the towel, her steps dragging. When the house came into sight, a small burst of energy carried her forward.

“Hot showers for all, and then we’ll head back to reality.” Deke made sure fluffy towels were in abundance and left them to it.

Brooke, the perpetual mermaid, opted for the large tub and a touch of bubbles. Once dried and dressed again, she headed out to the living room to watch some cartoons and wait on the adults. Kenzie chose the shower and reluctantly dressed for the departure. When she came out twenty minutes later, her daughter was curled up on the couch, fast asleep, while the cartoons had no audience. A movement outside on the patio told her where she would find their host.

“She is out like a light. We have managed to outlast her,” she said, grinning.

“I may have outlasted her, but she certainly outplayed me. I might have to admit that I may be getting older if a child can get the best of me.” They stood side by side at the railing, the silent vista changing its colors as the sun prepared to dip lower.

“Well, perhaps you can console yourself that you gave her another one of the best days of her life. Memories are important, and she will long remember this time. Thank you for that.”

“And what about her mother? Good memories that will last... maybe even replace some not-so-good ones?”

The answer was an easy one, and yet it wasn't. It could lead to all sorts of complications. But something told her to seize the moment... that little angel of trust?

“It will be one of the best. And I think it certainly has vanquished more than a few not-so-pleasant ones. It's been a revelation of sorts. I can't really explain it. It's something I have to take in and try to understand myself.”

“I was once given some sage advice by someone I admire a great deal. This person told me that happiness is a lot like a butterfly you admire in the garden. You see it and delight in it and you want it to stay forever. But you don't ruin it by grabbing and smothering it. You allow it to flourish and have the freedom to choose to stay or return. So I would love to grab this day and never let it end, but I feel that it will return and be even better next time. And there is why I am not a philosopher by any means,” he finished with a self-deprecating laugh. Yet his gaze was warmth, filled with promises and so much more.

Their gazes had made a decision and their lips carried the message. The kiss when it came was tempting, tasting, teasing, and something was freed inside of her because

she matched his rhythm... slow, then fast... seeking, and then giving. The drought was over and the dam had burst.

They drew apart in unison, but he held her in the warmth of his arms, and she stayed. “No apologies for that,” he said.

“None expected. But it’s going to complicate things. If it happens again.”

“It will happen again. And I think complications make the journey that much sweeter in the solutions. I’m falling for you, Ms. Calhoun. I certainly didn’t plan it. But here you have landed in my garden, like a beautiful butterfly, and I pray that you might want to return... perhaps even stay. But it’s up to you.”

“Mama, where are you? Is it time to go?” The small voice came through the open doorway. A reminder their time was coming to a close. But then a new road had presented itself.

“Yes, it’s time, sweetheart. Let’s go.” She stepped out of his arms and took a last look at the beautiful garden. And a tiny, soft-yellow butterfly flitted over to one of the fragrant blooms. Kenzie smiled. Perhaps she’d return to join the small creature... it was her choice to make.

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“It’s no use, Laurel,” Sammi Jo said across the table. “She’s not going to give the details, except that she had an amazing time, the food was amazing, the location was amazing, the water was amazing.”

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“Okay, but was the man amazing?” Laurel jumped in, her gaze on the woman beside Sammi Jo, finishing her salad. “Was he amazing, Kenzie?”

“Amazing.”

“And the jet helicopter?”

“Amazing.”

“And the kissing?”

“Amazing... hey, you tricked me.”

“See, little sister”—she looked over to Sammi Jo’s incredulous look at the turn of events—“you must leave it to a master of interrogation.” Her look of superiority was perfect.

“So, details, now that the cat is out of the bag.”

“There are no details. We had a lovely time... the three of us. And we are having a date night next week when Brooke leaves for her camping trip. And that will not come with details either.”

“Hallelujah! Our girl has come back to the land of the living, and isn’t love grand?” Sammi Jo smiled and high-fived her sister across the table.

“Who said anything about the ‘L’ word?” Kenzie was quick to point out. She had

only just been able to say it to herself a couple of times since their kiss three days ago. They had been swamped at work, and then Deke was busy helping at the ranches afterward. So time alone had not happened... but it would. And the covert glances they had shared along the hallways and across the tarmac during their workday had to suffice. But each evening, there was a brief phone call. She might not be able to sleep again without hearing his “sweet dreams” wish her good night. She knew that love had snuck in and toppled the walls, and her heart was running to trust someone again. She was powerless to fight it. In fact, Kenzie did not want to do that.

What could be more perfect in her world at the moment?

Chapter Sixteen

The funny thing about perfection? It had a way of not being so perfect. And that fact came crashing into her world like the proverbial lead balloon. On Sunday, just after noon, in the breakout room in the crisis management office at the hospital, that little devil came to visit on her shoulder again. She had come in to make certain that files were updated in the computer for the transition to a newer system the next day. Just one of the picky things that made her want to double-check it. Jay was on calendar duty and taking the phone calls. She was only half listening as he did his job.

“Wow... that guy has got game.”

“Game? What game are you betting on now?” She was only half interested. She had packing to get done with Brooke for her upcoming camping trip.

“Not a sports game... although some guys might think it is. Stringing along babes and having them clueless and calling for more. You didn’t mention our boss has girlfriends... two different ones and they are persistent. That explains his frequent flights north in the evenings.”

That got her attention. Along with a sudden cold chill down her backbone. She had to have misheard. “Explain how you know all this.”

“Mainly because this Emily person is so insistent in leaving messages if she can’t reach him on his cell. And I know he had a restaurant reservation the other evening because they called to confirm. And then she just called again... something about another dinner at something called the ‘rim house’ or some such that she would be late for. And then there is a Morgan that calls and simply tells me to have him answer his phone when she calls. She doesn’t like playing phone tag.”

Don’t jump to conclusions. Nice words, but they didn’t work too well once you’ve been a victim of another womanizing liar. Emily and Morgan. That chill remained in her bones.

In his last phone call, the night before, he had mentioned that he would need to make a run up to the rim house... his reference to his “special getaway.” Something there needed his attention. And now she knew what it was, and her name was Emily.

When she thought he had been at the ranches helping with firebreaks and such, had he been with one of them? Then making sure he had a new “sure thing” on the line with herself... he could make plans however he wanted. The old feeling of having been played and made a fool of suddenly engulfed her like a tidal wave.

Kenzie had never wanted to have that feeling again, but she had walked blindly right back into its path. Her vulnerability had to have made her an easy target. That was one of the things her ex had thrown in her face. She was vulnerable, which gave him a game plan. And another game plan had been her daughter. He got two targets for the price of one. While Deke was establishing his office in Burkitt, why not have an easy conquest locally? Then he could have the best of both worlds when he got bored with one. Although it sounded like this Emily was a lot higher on the hierarchy ladder than Morgan or even herself, having already gained visitation rights to his “hideaway

from the world.” She wanted to throw up. The computer was switched off and she grabbed her bag.

“Hey, you packing up? We have tomorrow off, so guess I will see you on Wednesday.”

“Sure. See you then.” She was gone. Running to find a place to hide and lick her wounds. The Lone Wolf had helped himself to another silly sheep.

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“I thought shewas here, working on a report for the changeover.” Deke had come in to surprise Kenzie before heading up to his Amarillo office.

“She was, but then she just up and left out of the blue. Said she’d see me Wednesday. That’s all I know. Sorry, Chief.”

Deke nodded. “I’ll be back late Tuesday or early Wednesday. Have a good day off.”

On the way across the tarmac, he dialed Kenzie’s cell. It went to voicemail. He knew she was busy trying to get Brooke on her way to her camping trip. He grinned at how excited the child had been on the phone the day before. He reminded her of what all they talked about on safety issues while at the rim house, swimming. She’d be out in nature and it could be dangerous. She should always know what was going on, especially if an adult wasn’t available. But Jackie was very responsible and Brooke should have a great time. He couldn’t wait to hear about it when she got back. More importantly, in the moment, he and Kenzie would be able to have some time together to have some serious discussions about the future... hopefully, the same one. But he wouldn’t get ahead of himself. Business was at hand first.

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Later that evening, he tried to call Kenzie again. This time he got the voicemail and had no choice but to talk to the machine. He said he would call again the next day and was sorry he missed saying goodbye to Brooke.

That carried over into Tuesday. Something was amiss... he could feel it. And he didn't care for that feeling. In the past, it had come before some bad things happened in his life. He tried to push it aside. He'd see her Wednesday. And somehow, they could find time to talk. Maybe at lunch.

If there were a freeze in late July, it couldn't have been any colder than Deke felt during the morning flight and later, in the office. What was going on? Kenzie rarely looked in his direction. She was civil and he knew the others didn't sense a change because she was a professional. But there was nothing personal, no smiles, no glances... just a coworker doing a job. Was this the new normal? How she hoped to keep their last few weeks together on a business footing? Why did he feel like there was something else going on? They needed to grab a few minutes.

He found her in a corner of the cafeteria... waiting on an order for a late lunch. He slid into the chair across from her. And then a panic rose inside his stomach. There was no one around, and the look she met him with was definitely devoid of any emotion... at least not what he might have expected.

"Stating the obvious here," he began, trying to feel his way, as if he were still dodging mines in the Middle East, "something seems off between us. What's wrong?"

She didn't speak right away. Her face was almost a mask with no feelings evident.

Panic and fear danced in the pit of his stomach. When she did finally respond, the tone was flat and iced. “Something is definitely off. I’m afraid that things have gotten a little... a lot carried away. And I have the job to consider and my daughter. It’s best that we step back a bit and slow things down. We need to keep things on a business footing.”

He was floored. Was he in the twilight zone? What happened? He thought they had moved forward and turned the same page together. Now she was calling it all off and back to square one? What had happened? Had he misread the whole situation? Had he made a fool of himself again?

“I don’t understand any of this. Did I overstep in some way? Do or say something wrong?”

“You said all the right things. That’s the problem. But I’m just not into being one of the pack again. Been there and it isn’t for me. I’m opting out of that. I’ve spoken to Dr. Damian and I would prefer to have the Trauma Unit Nursing Director position. You’ll get a temp flight nurse. She’s married, though. So that will narrow the field between Emily and Morgan... unless there are even more names I don’t know. But I’m out.”

She stood, because there was nothing more to say and because she wanted to scream out the pain that was gathering in the center of her chest. “I trust you will understand that I’ll make an excuse with Brooke why you won’t be around. It’s good she is leaving for the camping trip.”

“Emily? Morgan? What in the world are you thinking? Don’t I get to have a say?”

She shook her head. “Save your breath. I’ve heard too many excuses. Too many words.” Kenzie managed to turn and walk straight across the room and straight out of the hospital. Every step she took sounded like a door slamming shut between her

heart and brain once and for all.

*

It was afterdinner, consisting of a chicken salad sandwich and apple slices, that the call came from Brooke.

“Hi, Mama, I’m camping!”

Kenzie finally found a smile left in her. Her little girl could always bring it forth.
“Are you having fun?”

“It’s so much fun. I got to help put up the tent that has three rooms in it, and then there’s this thing you have to dig in the dirt around it in case it rains, but it’s not going to rain because the park ranger said that the weatherman said it wasn’t, but we dug it anyway. And then we got to help find little sticks and stuff for the fire, where the ranger said we could build our fire and no place else. And tonight we’re going to eat hot dogs and s’mores. Are you having fun, Mama?”

Kenzie wasn’t needed to participate much in the conversation as her daughter ran on from one subject to another. Then she did get her chance when Brooke stopped to take a deep breath. “Yes, I’m doing okay. Just missing you a lot already, but I want you to have a lot of fun and remember it all, so you can tell me everything about it when you get home, okay?”

“I will. And I’ll tell Mr. Deke about it too. And I miss Ranger. You don’t think Ranger will forget me, will he?”

“No, I think Ranger will not forget you.”

“Mrs. Jackie is here. You can speak to her, okay? We’re going to look for baby frogs

in the stream with Mr. David. If I find one, can I bring it home?"

"We'll think about that one. We might need to let it grow up more with its family first. But you run, have fun, and know I miss you and love you lots, sweetheart."

"Love you too, Mama. See you later! Here's Mrs. Jackie."

"Well, there is the rundown so far, and we've been here less than four hours," she laughed. "She's having a blast with the kids."

"I'm glad. I miss her like crazy already, but this is good for her. You are a saint for wanting to take her along with your family."

"What's one more? And besides, it gives you some 'me' time, and I hope someone tall and good-looking is going to help you enjoy it too."

And so it starts...the part where people will find out about the "change," and then the looks of pity, etc. will be sent her way. But it could wait until everyone was home again. Then she could cope better. Time to cut the conversation off. "You go have fun and please, no orphan frogs need to come home." They both laughed, and then the call ended.

Two days went by, and it seemed like two weeks. But Kenzie kept busy with her new position and learning the ropes and meeting people she had not met before. All the while, she kept an eye out in case a tall figure were to come into her line of sight. But Deke was nowhere to be seen. The sound of choppers came and went, and she saw the flight crews in the halls, but not the boss. Then the explanation arrived via Jay as she rounded a corner and literally almost ran him over.

"Hey, ex-partner! How are things in your new neck of woods? Miss me?"

“Things are great and, of course, why wouldn’t I miss you?” Good-natured kidding was always the message of the day with him. “I haven’t seen you around very much, though.”

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“Well, I’ve been busy helping out the new boss... teaching him the ropes here on the ground.”

“New boss?”

“Oh, that’s right, you probably have been too busy to hear it, but Deke is back, being the unseen big boss at the home base. The new guy seems to be okay. And I better move it, or he’ll take off without me.” They parted, and Kenzie had to go back to her office. She shut the door and sat down. The news had been a shock. It was unexpected. But it wasn’t surprising. Why wouldn’t he head back where it sounded like he had a couple of sure things lined up, female-wise? At least, that settled the issue of running into him. She could relax. That should make her happy. But it only brought an immense sadness.

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“Hey, girl. Towhat do I owe the pleasure of this surprise?” Kenzie looked up and saw Laurel in the doorway of her office.

“I was in the neighborhood... really. One of our camera crew was trying to get some footage of the fire over at Red Butte this morning, and he should have been more prepared, experience-wise. He got some ember burns on his leg and arm. He’ll be okay, but it’s a lesson learned the hard way.”

“Red Butte... I didn’t realize we had a fire over that way.” Her brain was trying to frame a map in her mind as to how far that was away from Decker Canyon... where her daughter was camping. It was a good ways, but fire traveled at the whim of

Mother Nature and the wind.

“Well, listening to the guys, Jaxson and Beaudry, everyone’s on high alert. Nerves stretched. Sammi Jo has the trailers ready in case we need to empty the stallion barns in a hurry. Those types of things. Be glad you live closer to town. Anyway, got to run. Take care!”

She thought about calling Jackie. But then that would show she might not trust her friend to take care of her child, much less her own children. If there was any threat of fire, the park rangers would take care of the situation... right? She dove into reports and made rounds and did everything to keep herself occupied until she needed to leave for home. On the way, she grabbed a hamburger and fries and decided to watch an old movie from ages ago. Then she nodded off.

Three more days and her daughter would be home. Kenzie woke with that thought in mind the next day. But sleep had been fitful and contained bad dreams that made no sense. Her head pounded. She picked up her phone and dialed Jackie’s number. It went straight to voicemail. She tried to eat something but gave up. Her brain warred with her heart that was aching far too much. Deke would not stay out of it. She hated this part... where you break up with someone and think how could you possibly go on breathing? But she knew that she would. She had once before. Because she had a little girl depending on her. And she would hold on to that, first and foremost.

What was going on with the group on this camping day? They needed to answer their phone.

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“That is the third time you’ve reached for the wrong spice. Your mind is not on this pot of chili. Something wrong with the new contracts? Morgan said you forgot all about the meeting with Hanks at the bank. After she called twice to remind you. So

let's have it." The woman meant what she said. She pulled out the stool from the kitchen counter and sat down, her arms folded on the table, gaze locked on Deke as he leaned against the kitchen cabinet across from her. He wasn't smiling.

"It's just been a long week. Things are hectic right now. Nothing is wrong with the business. I made up that meeting via Zoom with Hanks, and all is well with the contracts. You and Morgan, my assistant, need to stop being mother hens."

"Really? Well, we both know that won't be happening. So tell me the real reason you look like you haven't slept in days, you are forgetful, and you haven't mentioned either Brooke or her mother, where you once did more than a few times. My gut instinct is never wrong... as you know. And it is telling me that those two are involved, so stop wasting time and cut to the chase. What did you do to mess things up?"

Deke shook his head. "What makes you think I did something?"

Emily didn't say a word. She just stared him down with the look he had seen a few times in recent years. She was the widow of his business partner and probably the closest thing to a real mother he had ever known. He valued her counsel on all important things and had finally told her a bit about the mother and daughter he had met several weeks before. It hadn't taken her long to figure out things... even before he had.

He blew out his annoyance and shuffled his stance. "How do you do that?"

"Years of being married. Stop stalling."

"I thought that... I had hoped that maybe I had found someone to take that leap of faith with that you always preached to me I needed to find. Kenzie and Brooke came to mean a lot to me, and I thought... hoped... that she was getting past her issues and

might feel the same. Then everything changed overnight, and she said it was over, and she changed jobs and made it clear she and her daughter were done with me. And I have no idea why.”

“You didn’t listen to her then. I’m thinking she said what the problem was, but you’re a male and sometimes needed to be told more than once. So that was it? She didn’t hint at anything stupid you might have done?”

“I didn’t do anything stupid, as you put it. I brought her here to my home, and I thought she had let her guard down and was ready to see if we might have a chance together. Then she just said she wasn’t going to be one of the group... and she wouldn’t do that again. We were over.”

“Part of the group... what group?”

“I don’t know... all she mentioned was the strange part. She said Emily and Morgan could have me or some such. I don’t know... my brain was going in all directions at that point.”

“Did you tell her who Emily and Morgan might be? Or did you let her think... erroneously... that we might be females in your life that you might also be seeing?”

He stopped still. “Are you crazy? Of course not... why would she think that?”

“Because a woman who has been hurt... had her heart ripped apart for the world to see once... is not likely to want to experience that again. If she was daring—for the first time, as you have said before—to finally lower her guard with you... and then something or someone introduces the names of a couple females in relation to you... and you do not explain who we are, then that is on you. She took a chance of giving space to you to see if you could take care of her heart and her daughter’s. And then something comes along and tosses all doubts back into the mix... she is going to run

and protect herself again. Sounds like she did just that. And the longer you let it simmer, the thicker the walls will come back in place. So if you can give up this easily, then you weren't really invested. Best she dumped you." That being said, she stood and went back to stirring the big pot of chili meat.

"That's it? All you have to say to help me here?"

Emily tossed him a long look over the rim of glasses perched on the tip of her nose. "You're on your own now. Fight or flight. Looks like she chose flight. Guess you did too. Pass the pepper, please."

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The whisper of smoke began like an undulating snake, slowly staking claim to the air. Then orange trails began branching off like roots shooting from the earth, the wind catching at them and pushing the heat across the grasslands. The speed was shocking. The monster grew and consumed more. The whisper became a shout and smoke billowed into the sky, blocking the sun. It knew no boundaries and had no rules. Embers blew across roads and lit barns, corrals, and then houses on fire. By the time the first alarm sounded, and then a second and a third, it was already far ahead of mere mortals and out of control.

In the canyon, people were stirring, noses lifted to catch strange whiffs on the breeze. Those old-timers who had fought the monster before sounded the alarm. Park rangers were combing camping spots and tracking occupants of empty cars that had ventured up the trails for more solitude in camping. But time was not on their side. Traffic jams began to clog the only road out of the canyon.

Yells echoed off canyon walls, up and down dry beds of arroyos and streams. Wildlife ran for higher ground.

The call came as Kenzie had given in and taken a second headache pill. She had felt out of sorts since waking from a fitful sleep. What it was, she couldn't put her finger on. But all paled when she heard Sammi Jo's voice on the phone. There was no preamble.

"Laurel is on the way to you right now. The plane can get you all within ten miles of Decker Canyon on the back side of the fire. It's a small landing site. The firefighters and medical staff are setting up base camp right now at that spot. Everything is going to be fine."

“There’s a fire? I knew it... I felt it... something was wrong.”

“Keep it together. Laurel’s going with you. I’m situating things here with Jeff and Lacy, and then I’ll be on my way.”

There was a loud knocking on her front door, and Laurel didn’t wait for her to open it. She was in the hallway in a flash.

“Laurel’s here. I’m leaving.”

“Love you, and all will be okay.” The line went dead with Sammi Jo.

“What do you need to take?” Laurel asked.

“Nothing. Let’s go.” She grabbed her purse and out the door she headed. Laurel caught up at the truck. The engine gunned and a new speed limit was set... wide open.

The plane was ready and waiting, and as soon as the door shut, it was moving.

Only then did Kenzie feel like she could take in a breath. She and Laurel were seated directly across from each other, a small cocktail table between them. Laurel’s phone began pinging. She was texting quickly. Kenzie’s brain had taken leave of reality for the last half hour... since Sammi Jo’s phone call. Now, things seemed to be forming more questions than answers in her brain.

“So Sammi Jo heard about the fire being where Brooke had gone camping... by phone call or what?”

Laurel looked uncomfortable and hesitated in her texting. “Phone call.”

“I hope they let Brooke know that her mama is coming. They’re at the base camp,

waiting for us to pick them up... right?"

Laurel set her phone to the side. She moved to take the chair next to Kenzie. And Kenzie felt as if someone was about to drop her out of the plane. Something wasn't right.

"Honey, don't panic. You need to hear me right now. But when word came through the park rangers to everyone that they needed to pack up and evac the park... well, there was a little stray dog that the kids had befriended, and in the commotion, he ran off into the brush. Jackie had put the kids into the car and went back to grab a bag. When she got back to the car, there was no Brooke. The others said she had run off to get the pup so he could be okay too. I thought you knew that already. The base camp is there so they can figure out how to best get in there when they can."

"No, no, no!" Her screams hurt her own ears, and her throat burned. Her hands cupped her face and she felt at a total loss of sensation and thought in her brain. Laurel and the flight crew managed to calm her and then she went too quiet. Her thought process was functioning internally... she just couldn't articulate because the pain would overwhelm. Her little girl was gone... alone... in a wildfire. She had to get there. She'd find her. That was her whole mantra during the brief flight. Mama's coming. Mama's coming.

When they landed and she stepped outside the plane, the air was full of wood smoke. They gave her a mask to wear. Her eyes burned... whether from the smoke or ash in the air or too many tears, she had no idea. She needed answers.

"Who is in charge? I want to talk to them." A tall, older man came forward in firefighter clothing and a park ranger was beside him. "I need to go where my daughter disappeared. She'll hear my voice. I have to go."

"Ma'am, we can't get you in there."

“Yes, you can. I will sign whatever waiver you need me to sign. I’m a nurse... I can help. But I have to get up there!”

“As soon as we get clearance to fly, we’ll put more people up there. But the smoke and fire is too volatile right now. We could have more losses if we let anyone attempt it.”

She had never known such helplessness before. She needed to find a way out and up to the park itself. Laurel followed her from the portable building into the growing darkness... a darkness caused by the sun being blunted. She felt herself being pulled into her hug. The tears flowed. “She’s my baby... all I have. She’s crying for her mama, I can feel it. Someone has to listen to me.”

A chopper appeared at the edge of the field and touched the ground briefly. A familiar figure came off it, and then it lifted away before anyone noted its arrival. It was Sammi Jo who came running up to them.

“I thought they weren’t allowing anyone to fly yet. The crews are all still making their way on foot,” Laurel said.

Sammi Jo nodded. “The crews are moving forward, but it’s slow going. And no one is flying. They’ve warned them with hefty fines or loss of licenses if they don’t listen.”

“Then how is that one allowed and who...”

“Deke.”

The name hung frozen in the air.

Kenzie whirled around to face Sammi Jo. “They’re letting him go? And how did he know about Brooke?”

“No one knows what he is doing. He didn’t get permission. They told him to stand down earlier. But he’s not listening. And he didn’t know about Brooke until he ran into Jaxson and asked about you and if Brooke was home safe, and Jaxson told him. He didn’t hesitate. I heard what he was up to and bummed a ride with him. He and Ranger are on their way to find her. No one was going to keep him away. And if anyone can get it done, it’ll be him.”

Kenzie didn’t know how to feel about it, except that someone was doing something. Deke, of all people. Why would he risk his life for them? Nothing made any sense in the world at that moment.

“Let’s go into the mess tent and find some coffee,” Laurel said. “You need something to eat, Kenzie. You haven’t had anything today.”

“I can’t eat. Coffee is okay, but no food.”

Laurel and Sammi Jo exchanged looks with each other, but they didn’t push it. There were a few firefighters in the tent... but most were trying to reset their gear and wait for the green light to replace those on the lines and make inroads deeper into the canyon.

“We’ll go through the line and get some things... just in case you feel able later to eat something. Sit here and relax as best as you can. They know to bring word to you here.”

Kenzie sat huddled in her chair. Her arms were wrapped around herself. She couldn’t think about anything but her baby. It was getting dark. She had said so many prayers. And she had begged and bargained.

“The pain is horrible. But if anyone can bring her home to you, it’ll be Deacon.” The words were spoken softly and with such conviction, she thought she might have imagined them. But then she saw the slight figure of an older woman, her gray hair pulled back in a smooth bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were a soft-brown and full of compassion.

“I’m sorry,” Kenzie said. “Have we met?”

“No, but I feel like I know you and little Brooke. Deacon has spoken of you both quite often in recent weeks.”

“Do you work with Deke... Deacon?” she corrected. She was mystified.

“In a way, I suppose we really work for each other.” The woman sat down on the bench next to her. “My arthritis is not liking me very much right now. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Please sit. Are you a volunteer here?”

“I heard that Deacon was headed up here, and I felt I needed to come and at least lend moral support.”

“Have you known him for a long time?”

“Let’s see, it will be about twelve... no fourteen years, I think.”

Kenzie fell silent. It hurt. It hurt to think about Brooke, and it hurt to think that Deacon was the one who was risking so much to go where no one else could or would.

“People know I speak my mind. Old ladies can do that. I’ve hoped for a long time that you would come along. And yet, I was also a bit afraid.”

“I’m sorry... you’ve lost me here. My brain isn’t quite fast enough for riddles right now.”

“Deacon deserves the best. He was hurt terribly in his life... by his mother, his father, and then a woman who tore his heart up right before they were to be wed. At least, it was before and not after the vows. I was afraid he would close himself off. But then one day, he mentioned your name. And he talked about you and about Brooke, and I watched his trust grow again, day by day. And he smiled more, and then he told me not long ago that he had to experience such a heartbreak in order to know the real worth of love and being able to open himself up to someone again. And you gave him that. I wanted to thank you and to be here to make sure he comes back safe and sound and with your little one. If any man can do it, he will... no matter what he must do. Failure is not in his vocabulary. But I think you know that.”

“I’m sorry... but your name...”

“Emily Gray. My husband was Deacon’s mentor and business partner before he had to retire due to his health. We never had our own children, but Deacon has been more of a son to us than anything. And I’ve come to lean on him a bit more since I was widowed. I think we’ve helped each other. And I am so glad he found the way to open his heart to life and love, and I am grateful to you. I only hope you haven’t turned your heart totally away from him. He mentioned things weren’t right between

you just a day ago. All I can say is my advice to him from being a woman in love with my husband for over fifty years—you either fight for each other or you run away and leave it. I think you're both fighters. At least, I pray that you both have time to realize that after this evening.”

Emily. This woman was the Emily? And Kenzie experienced even more shock. What had she done? She had been cruel... and cold to Deke. And yet, despite it all, Deke was putting himself on the line for her little girl. He did not have to go. He could have sent someone else. He could be waiting for a safe green light. But no... he was the one willing to do anything to bring Brooke home to her... to them all. How could she make it right? Would the night ever end?

“If you'll excuse me, I need to send a text to tell Morgan that I arrived safely and we are waiting for word.”

“Morgan? And she would be?”

“She's been both my husband's assistant while he was alive and continued for Deke. She is holding the fort down and waiting for my report.”

Emily and Morgan. The mystery was solved. Yet, she had jumped to all the wrong conclusions because she was afraid. Afraid that it was all happening again, just like her ex had done. So, she took the coward's way out and ran. Ran away from Deke without trusting. How could she tell him what a fool she had been? What if she never got that chance? And her heart broke into even tinier pieces.

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The girls came back, and introductions were made. The trio became four and the hours became two. And then there was activity. The camp came alive. A police officer came toward them, and Kenzie felt the women gather to share their strength with her. The officer smiled. Kenzie grabbed her breath. “She’s been found. They are on their way in. A water truck picked them up and is bringing them into the medical tent.”

“She’s hurt? What’s wrong? Why isn’t she flying in?”

“She’s able to be ambulatory. They’ll check her out. And the chopper did have to land a distance from here. But all passengers were able to walk away.”

Kenzie felt her knees folding, and Laurel held her tight.

“You said passengers—what about the pilot?” Emily voiced what she couldn’t.

“All we got was the word ‘passengers.’ We hope that includes all souls that were onboard.”

There were tears all around, both thankful and yet still apprehensive. All Kenzie wanted was to hold her little girl in her arms and never let her go. And ten minutes later, that was what she was able to do.

“Mama, what are you doing? You’re squeezing me so hard. Did they fix Ranger’s paw? He got burned. He jumped over the fire and landed in the water with me.” Kenzie walked beside the gurney as they moved her daughter into the medical tent and the physicians checked her over. Aside from some cuts and scrapes, she was

pronounced okay. But to be safe, they were transporting on to the hospital in Burkitt for observation and more lung X-rays.

While they got her prepared for the trip, Kenzie searched for a familiar figure to come into the medical area. The doctor had told her that the pilot made it out also and was taking his dog home shortly in another transport.

She left Brooke with Laurel and Sammi Jo and went in search of Deke. She found him in another tent. A nurse informed her as she hesitated just inside the opening that he had some bruising and a gash on his forehead from the helmet hitting the steering column as the craft hit the ground harder than expected. But he was fine, otherwise. Emily was there, and when she saw Kenzie, she smiled and stepped aside to let them have some privacy.

Deke was seated on the edge of the gurney where Ranger lay, his tail managing to wag at her approach. Deke had a bandage just at his hairline, which seemed stark against his skin. His clothing was torn and soot covered. Ranger's head lay on his lap, white gauze covering one of his front paws. Deke looked tired, and Kenzie didn't know how to say what she needed. What she wanted. He looked at her, and his gaze was closed to her searching. She took a deep breath.

"I have so much to say that I have no idea how to start. But to begin, there aren't words to thank you enough for what you did for Brooke. And what it will always mean to me. The chance you took even attempting it. And there aren't enough ways to apologize for how horrible I was to you the other day. I made all the wrong assumptions. But Emily is a dear lady and I can see how much she cares. I let my past rear its head again and push me away from trusting. I ran instead of trusting. I want to say more, but I have to go to the hospital right now with Brooke."

He finally spoke. "Give Brooke a huge hug for me again. She was one brave, tough kid. You better get moving."

And he turned away. He had dismissed her. There was nothing more to say.

Chapter Seventeen

Two days later, Brooke came home. She was accompanied by an assortment of stuffed animals, balloons, and goody bags. She was rather basking in the attention. And Kenzie was just fine with that. Her little girl had come through a nightmare, and she was able to hold her again. She had settled on the couch, quilt and pillow forming her throne, and Kenzie served her favorite pizza, followed by a slice of “welcome home” cake from the fans at the hospital cafeteria... sprinkles in place.

Kenzie sat down beside her and opened a conversation without pushing. “You are a very brave young lady. Everyone is saying that. How did you make it up there alone? Were you scared? How did they find you in all that smoke?”

Brooke probably had more resilience than any of the adults around her in recent days expected. She gave matter-of-fact responses. “I was trying to find the puppy. I was very scared when I saw the fire and I couldn’t go back to where the camp was. Then I remembered what Mr. Deke told me to do when I heard grown-ups talking about the fire at the ranch one day, and I did that.

“And then I remembered that when we went hiking the first day, we passed this big windmill, and there was a pond around it with cement sides. It had water. Maybe I could get in the water or climb the windmill if I had to. It was high, and I knew you told me to not climb anymore, but I bet I could have done it. The smoke was really foggy, but I found it. It hurt my eyes and I was coughing. I had to climb over the wall, and it scraped my legs, but I got to the middle of the water, and then when the fire got closer, I kept going under the water, trying to hold my breath. I could do that because Mr. Deke worked with me on that when we were diving.

“I heard the helicopter and when it got really low, the door opened and Ranger

jumped out. He came running fast and he cleared that wall like it wasn't there. He flew. You should have seen him. Like in a movie. He stayed with me until Mr. Deke could come get me. The fire was awfully close, but he grabbed me, covered my head with a wet blanket, and we ran to the helicopter. We took off, but then there was a funny noise, and he told me to hang on tight, and it was really bumpy. When we landed, he told me to get out and run away from the helicopter as fast as I could. Ranger would go with me and get me to help... hold on to his collar."

"So he told you how to take care of yourself... that's what you guys would talk about while we had lessons at the swimming pool?"

"Yep. And he told me that I could be scared, but I needed to make my brain work and not panic. And I did my best. I kept telling my brain it had to work. Did you know Mrs. Jackie found the pup? He came back to the car. They're going to try to find him a home. He is really a sweet little puppy. I'm glad he's okay."

"Were you surprised that Mr. Deke found you?"

"Nope. He said if I ever needed him, he'd be there. And he kept his promise. Why hasn't Ranger come to visit? Will they come over now that I'm home? He's a hero. They both are my real heroes."

"Well, Mr. Deke has a lot of work to do. And Ranger has to let his paw heal. So they have to get well too."

Brooke looked sad. But Kenzie got her to smile again by turning on one of her favorite movies. "I'll go in the kitchen and make us a bowl of popcorn." That made the smile grow.

A few minutes later, she was coming down the hallway with the freshly popped goody when she heard a car pull into the driveway. She expected it to be Jackie,

dropping by as she said she would on her way home. Kenzie opened the door and then stopped. Deke, with Ranger beside him, stood on her porch. A box from Tallie's bakery was in his hand.

He looked good. Even with the stitches on his forehead.

"I hope this isn't a bad time. I wanted to drop this by for Brooke. And Ranger's been moping about, so he wanted to pay her a visit."

"Of course, come on in." She stepped back and he moved toward the living room. Brooke saw Ranger, and she suddenly was up and laughing, giving the dog hugs. Then she saw Deke, and she ran around the couch, and he managed to catch her up in the crook of his arm.

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“You look like you’re feeling much better than when I last saw you.”

“I’m all better. So we can go swimming soon, right?”

“Brooke, let the poor man rest. Take the popcorn and set it on the table. Your movie is about to start.”

“Okay. Can Ranger watch with me?”

“If they have time. That’s up to Mr. Deke.” Kenzie knew he would try to find an excuse because he expected that she wanted him to leave. “Yes, they’ve missed each other. If you have time to spare, I can fix some coffee or tea or whatever while they enjoy their visit.”

“And here are some of your favorite cupcakes that you can have when your mom says you can. Just as I promised.”

Brooke gave him a hug, and she set the box on the table next to the popcorn. “Thank you, Mr. Deke. You’re the best.”

“Coffee? Something cold?”

“Tea would be fine.”

He followed her into the kitchen, keeping some distance, his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

It was silence as she took down a glass, filled it with ice, and then poured the tea. Her grip on the pitcher was tight, as her hands might shake too much otherwise. She handed him the glass and he took a sip.

“We could sit on the porch,” she offered. “There’s a breeze.”

“Okay.”

They reached the rockers, and he was about to sit when Kenzie knew she had to say something. “Look, this feels really awkward. And it’s my fault.” He looked like he was about to interrupt, but she didn’t give him a chance. “I was hateful to you. I accused and didn’t let you defend yourself. I jumped to the wrong conclusions because I was scared. I was scared that the person I thought you were might not be the person I wanted you to be, and I was tired of being the fool. But I was wrong. I should have known better. And I hurt you and ruined everything and... well, I don’t know what to say.”

He was silent for a couple of minutes... really long minutes. He took another sip of his tea and set it on the table at the railing. “I’m glad you ran out of words. I was afraid my ice would melt before you finished and I could take a drink.”

“I see.” What else was she to say?

“I don’t think you do. But let me havemysay now. I don’t need hero worship or to be put on a pedestal. I did what I did because I made a promise that I would be there for Brooke if she were ever afraid or in trouble. I wasn’t going to have her think I didn’t mean that. I knew I had to try. I had done worse flying jobs overseas. And I knew that if you lost her, it would break you into a thousand pieces. There was no question that Ranger and I would get her. I did it and it’s over. But there’s something more important to settle.”

“More important?”

“You should probably just listen right now because I don’t make speeches, and I am going to make one stab at getting this right. I’m here today because of Emily. You met her, you talked. You know that she is very special in my life. So when she arrived on my doorstep this morning, she wasn’t very nice about it. She told me I was acting like a stubborn, pig-headed mule of a man. And a few other things I won’t repeat. But when Emily gets that riled up, she is always right. And I listened and I gave it a lot of thought. So I went to the bakery, got the cupcakes with an extra helping of sprinkles for good luck, and here we are. I figured you might slam the door in my face, or if I got inside, maybe the cupcakes and Brooke would persuade you to let me stay a minute... or two.”

“Good plan.”

“There is not one word I have said to you since the moment I met you that has not been true. I’m nothing like your ex. I would hope you can see that by now. I don’t give my heart away easily. The first time was a mistake. The second... well, the jury is out on that one. But once it’s given, that’s it.

“I can say without a doubt that I have fallen in love with you, Kenzie Calhoun. I hadn’t expected to do that. And I realized something that shocked me even more when I could say that—I am in love for the first and, hopefully, the last time in my life. What I felt or thought was love the first time around was certainly nothing in comparison to what my heart feels when you do as little as smile at me. And that is a daunting admission.

“I was stubborn for a day or more... and then I was afraid that if you felt anything for me now, it would be because you were grateful for my bringing Brooke home. All I wanted was to be loved because you trusted in us, the three of us, together now and forever.

“I just want to restore your trust, to make you laugh more, to ease the burden by being the person you can share your load with when it gets too heavy, to know you’ll want to be there to remind me to enjoy life with the ones who you love and who love you right back. And if that person happens to be an angel with the blue of the sky in her eyes and will fly away beside me now and then, that will make my life complete. Our job is to rescue people. But I believe that we rescued each other.”

Then he confused her. Instead of taking her in his arms, he turned toward the open front door. “That’s your cue, I believe.”

Brooke came rushing out, Ranger right beside her. They both looked at her. Brooke raised her hands and she presented one of the cupcakes to him... one with lots of sprinkles. And then Kenzie saw it. Instead of a cherry on top, there was a ring... a glittering, sparkling ring with a sky-blue diamond solitaire in the center of smaller ones. Deke went down on one knee with that smile that had won her heart from almost the very first moment.

“You were in on this?” Kenzie looked at her daughter, who had the biggest grin ever on her face. She nodded. “We made the plan in the hospital, but you didn’t know he was there. You have to say ‘yes’ now so he can get up and we can eat cupcakes.”

“I think you and Ranger can go inside right now,” Deke said with a grin. “I think I can handle the rest.”

“You got it!” The pair left them.

“I believe...” he began but didn’t get to finish.

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“Yes. How could I refuse a man who likes sprinkles? And gives me the best cupcake of all? I love you, Deke Hayes. I will fly anywhere with you because I give you my total trust, once and forever. Will you fly me home with you, cowboy... always?”

She didn't have time to ask twice before he stood and pulled her into his arms.

Epilogue

Three months later...

“That's very interesting,” Matt said, taking in the four-tier wedding cake.

“What's interesting?” Laurel asked. “It's a wedding cake. You've seen plenty of them.”

“Yes, but usually they have roses and doves and all that wedding stuff on them. This one is covered in sprinkly things, and there's a helicopter on top.”

“Your point is? A wedding cake is special to the bride and groom. That's all that matters... that and, hopefully, it tastes good.”

“And a picnic for a reception? Granted, this is a gorgeous spot at sunset from this patio, but an early October evening with dinner on that patio down by the river? Remind me not to have too much of the spiked punch and try to navigate those steps.”

“Make yourself useful. Round up the guys. We are starting this on time. The groom

wants to fly away as the moon rises... very romantic,” Sammi Jo added, joining the duo.

“Ah, romance, yes... that’s what gets a guy in trouble,” Matt mumbled. But he followed the orders given to him.

Five minutes later, the music began, and the guests gathered in the half-moon circle as indicated, with the pastor standing in the center. Once again, the couple had chosen to do things a little differently. The groom, in a dark-blue suit, walked hand in hand from the house with the bride in her white-lace tea-length dress, a bouquet of scarlet roses in her hand. They were accompanied by their one attendant, Brooke, in sparkly pink ruffles. The three of them stopped in the center with hands joined. The vows were spoken from their hearts and the rings were handed over by Brooke. Before the kiss and pronouncement, Deke went down on one knee and presented the little girl with a necklace and made a vow to her as well—the three became one family, and tears flowed throughout the assembled guests. Happy tears and then cheers from all erupted. The reception could begin for the next two hours.

And then, on cue, the moon began its rise. The guests were enjoying themselves in earnest. “You throw quite a party,” Jaxson commented to the groom, as they waited on the bride to rejoin them for the bouquet toss and then the honeymoon getaway.

“Thanks. It was what we wanted. Kenzie planned it all, and I wanted it to be extra special for her. Including the timing of the full moon—it has special meaning for the two of us, and I am thankful for a cloudless sky. And very thankful and blessed for all the family and friends who helped make this night what it is. I’m a lucky man. Now I know why you and Beaudry are always smiling. You married awesome ladies and I did also... much to my unending amazement.”

“The best is yet to be or some such,” Matt joined in, raising his champagne glass on high.

“You realize this leaves you as the last man standing, right?” Beaudry pointed out.

“Yes, well, I will gladly hold that title.”

“It’s time to toss the bouquet, everyone. I hope Kenzie likes the surprise in store for her. It took a lot to pull it off, and I was afraid it might not make it on time,” Deke said, as the guests and the single ladies lined up for the traditional toss on the patio. The helicopter stood waiting for the bride and groom several yards from the festivities.

Laurel moved to stand closer to Matt and lowered her voice. “I recall one time that you said you didn’t care much for surprises. In fact, not at all.”

Matt grinned at her. “I believe I said that, yes. Why?”

“Just checking. You might want another glass of champagne.” He turned to do just that as the waiter passed by. The bouquet went into the air, and then laughter and clapping arose. And then, there was a cry of surprise from the bride and a collective gasp from the guests, then hardy applause.

“Wow, that’s some gift Deke pulled off. He really shocked Kenzie, judging by the look on her face. It’s a great surprise!” Sammi Jo clapped louder and even had tears in her eyes.

“Damn, I missed it. What happened?” Matt turned from the server, the glass sloshing liquid. The crowd was keeping the gift out of his sight. He searched over heads and saw nothing. He moved to stand on the rim of the patio next to the river for a better view.

Beaudry moved closer. “You might not want to do that, friend.”

“I’m fine. Why not? No worries about me.” Matt steadied himself on the stones, looking for a better footing around him.

“Hello, Matteo.”

His gaze shot up. He saw the wedding bouquet first, and then he saw the woman holding it. Twelve years ago... it was happening all over again. Matt blinked twice. It was the champagne. It had to be. But the person, the apparition, did not disappear.

And then he made a miscalculation when he went to step off the stone rim. Amid gasps and hands reaching for him, the splash was inevitable. The gasps gave way to full-out laughter. Luckily, the water was not that deep, and he was able to find his footing, half his body out of the cold water. Hopefully, the chilled water had cleared the fog in his brain that had created such a bad dream. He looked upward and yet, she was still there. MaKenna.

“I should have warned you. But it was to be a huge surprise for Kenzie. Deke was able to bring MaKenna home for the wedding. Isn’t it great?!” Jaxson gave Matt a helping hand. Then he was standing on dry land, still feeling like he had stepped back in time.

“Better late than never,” MaKenna said, with a laugh glittering in those emerald-green eyes.

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“That’s our Matteo.” Beaudry slapped his hand on the shoulder of the man he now stood beside, trying to get Matt to respond. “Always making a splash wherever he goes.” The joke fell flat.

“Some things never change.” Makenna’s cat-like eyes held their flash for a moment more, but it soon disappeared as Kenzie claimed her sister by the hand, and the pair raced inside the house while the rest of the guests prepared to wish the couple a great send-off.

“We’ll find you some dry clothes,” Laurel spoke up, moving to stand beside Matt. He slowly shook his head, like a person waking from a deep sleep.

“No... it’s time I head home. I’m not in the mood for any more partying.” He stomped more water from his soaked pants and boots. At least, he had given the other guests some laughs and stories for the coffee shop on Monday. That thought darkened the evening even more.

And maybe, Monday would come and the world would right itself again... or maybe he’d just pack and move far out of state. Better still, the evening would all have been a dream. That was the thought he would hold in his brain.

All a bad dream in the middle of a romantic wedding.

History repeating itself.

The End