

THE SOLDIER'S SWEETHEART

SORAYA
LANE



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Soraya Lane

The Soldier's Sweetheart

«HarperCollins»

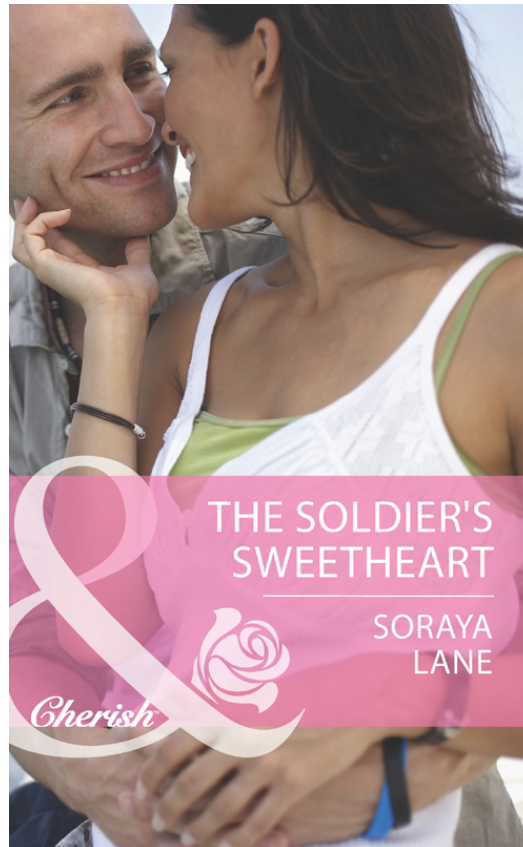
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Returning Special Forces soldier Nate Calhoun is struggling to adjust to small-town life. Only Sarah Anderson, his childhood sweetheart, can see straight through his surly exterior to his pain. But while hanging out like they used to, they realise that there is still an undeniable spark between them...

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THE LARKVILLE LEGACY

A secret letter ... two families changed for ever

Welcome to the small town of Larkville, Texas, where the Calhoun family has been ranching for generations.

Meanwhile, in New York, the Patterson family rules America's highest echelons of society.

Both families are totally unprepared for the news that they are linked by a shocking secret.

For hidden on the Calhoun ranch is a letter that's been lying unopened and unread—until now!

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THE SECRET THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

by Lucy Gordon

THE SOLDIER'S SWEETHEART

by Soraya Lane

THE BILLIONAIRE'S BABY SOS

by Susan Meier

About the Author

Writing for Mills & Boon® Cherish™ is truly a dream come true for **SORAYA LANE**. An avid book reader and writer since her childhood, Soraya describes becoming a published author as “the best job in the world,” and hopes to be writing heartwarming, emotional romances for many years to come.

Soraya lives with her own real-life hero on a small farm in New Zealand, surrounded by animals and with an office overlooking a field where their horses graze.

For more information about Soraya and her upcoming releases, visit her at her website, www.sorayalane.com, her blog, www.sorayalane.blogspot.com, or follow her at www.facebook.com/SorayaLaneAuthor.

The Soldier's Sweetheart Soraya Lane



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For Natalie & Nicola.

Thank you so much for your encouragement,
support and friendship.

I don't know what I'd do without our daily email chats!

CHAPTER ONE

NATE CALHOUN held up one hand to shield his face from the sun. He'd forgotten what it was like to look out over the land, to see grass stretching so far into the distance that he couldn't tell where their ranch ended and the next one began.

Sand he was used to, but not grass.

He pulled the door shut behind him and stretched out his right leg, trying not to grimace. His damn calf wouldn't stop throbbing, and no matter how much he tried to ignore it, walking wasn't as easy as it used to be.

Nate glanced up at the main house, knew exactly what he'd find if he walked over. Nancy, their long-time housekeeper, would be clearing the breakfast dishes; there'd still be the smell of strong coffee lingering in the air, and there'd probably be some leftovers waiting to be eaten. But he wasn't ready to be part of that life again, didn't know when he'd be able to answer the questions his family seemed so intent on asking him whenever he spent time with them.

It was why he'd walked away from them all on his first night back and taken over the unused guesthouse.

Nate turned and walked a track that was still oddly familiar to him. As a boy, right up until he'd left the ranch to join the army, he'd wandered to a massive tree tucked far enough away from the house to be private. Where a weathered timber swing had tilted back and forth in the breeze. Somewhere that he'd never shared with anyone except for ...

Who the hell was that?

Nate stopped and squinted. He was close enough to see the tree but not close enough to figure out who was sitting on a swing that he'd expected to be long gone by now.

He straightened and tried his hardest not to limp, even though he knew that disguising his injury was impossible.

Then the mystery figure on the swing turned his way.

Nate gulped. Hard. Before grinding his teeth together and walking toward her.

It was Sarah. After all these years, he'd managed to find Sarah Anderson under his tree.

Some things would never change.

She stood as he approached, a shy smile making her lips tilt ever so slightly in the corners, a faint blush creeping across her cheeks.

"Hey, Nate."

He did his best to return the smile, but the truth was that simple things like grinning at a friend didn't come so easy to him anymore. And besides, he didn't even know if he could call Sarah a friend these days, not after what had happened between them.

"Sarah," he managed, stopping a few paces from her.

She hesitated, flushed all over again, before leaning awkwardly into him and giving him a hug.

Nate stiffened, tried to relax and found it impossible. Even with Sarah's gentle embrace, her arms so softly around him, her long hair brushing against his cheek. Once, he'd thought he'd never want to leave the comfort of Sarah's arms. Now it only made him want to run.

"You look good, Nate," Sarah told him as she pulled away and sat back down. "It's so nice to see you back here. I can't believe you're home."

Nate nodded, thrust his hands into his back pockets. "It's—" he couldn't lie to her, not to Sarah "—different being back."

"I'm so sorry about your father." Sarah's eyes flooded with tears as she reached for him, her fingers curling around his forearm as she leaned forward again. "He was always so nice to me when I was here with you."

Nate smiled. He didn't even have to force it. "Yeah, he was pretty fond of you, too." Back in the days when he and Sarah were joined at the hip, his dad had loved him having Sarah over all the time. Everyone had, because there wasn't a person in Larkville who didn't like Sarah Anderson.

He looked up as she removed her hand from his arm and immediately wished he hadn't. Because he'd never forgotten the warm amber color of her eyes or the way she seemed to be able to look straight through him, to see what he was thinking, what he was feeling.

Only there was no way that even Sarah could know what was going on inside of him, not now.

Sarah sighed like she wasn't sure what to say, before turning a sunny smile his way. "Have you heard that I've been roped into organizing the Fall Festival?" Sarah shook her head. "I mean, I'm looking forward to the tribute for your dad, but trying to get everyone in this town into line is harder than it looks, I tell you!"

Nate couldn't help but smile back at her, and for once it was genuine, not him trying to act happy to get the people around him off his back. "I bet you're loving it."

Sarah glared at him, a playfulness there that had been missing in his life for so long he'd forgotten it had ever even existed. A spark of happiness that for a moment, the briefest of moments, made him feel like he'd never left the farm, never seen what he wished he could forget, never ... Nate swallowed hard and tried to focus on Sarah's pretty face instead of the memories that haunted him.

"Are you home for good, Nate?"

Her question surprised him, made him crash back to reality. "Yeah." He grunted out the word, still unable to believe that after all these years his career in the army was over for good. That he was back home, and in such a short time he'd lost both his mom and his dad, too. Home sure wasn't what it used to be.

"You're certain?"

Nate braved making eye contact with the girl who had stolen his heart when he was a teenager. "Yeah, I'm sure." He wished he hadn't snapped at her, but he couldn't help it. What did she want to hear? The truth of why he wasn't going back? Because not even Sarah could get details of *that* story out of him.

"I'm sorry, I know better than to pry." Sarah sighed again and looked away. "Moose!" she called.

Moose? Nate was about to ask her who the heck she was calling when ... "What the hell?" Nate spun, ready to fight, body alert even though his leg was starting to throb.

"Moose!" Sarah called again, crouching toward the long grass where the noise was coming from.

A massive dog appeared, launching from his hiding place and landing in front of Sarah. Nate could have sworn his heart was about to beat straight from his chest and thump to his feet.

"Since when do you have a dog named Moose?" he asked.

The dog glared at him, sitting protectively beside Sarah.

"You know me, sucker for animals in need," she replied, stroking the dog's head lovingly. "Your brother found him one day and nicknamed him, because he looked like a gangly baby moose. No one knows how he ended up around here, but he's been with me ever since."

Nate eyed the German Shepherd, not liking the way he was being watched in response. The canine was acting like he was challenging his authority and Nate wasn't used to being the one on the back foot. "Is he as staunch with Todd as he's being with me right now?"

The smile fell from Sarah's face like water thrown over a flame at the mention of her husband.

"It was really nice seeing you, Nate, but we'd better be off."

He watched as she moved past him, her eyes damp again like she was about to cry. "Yeah, nice seeing you, too."

He should have asked her to stay. Should have patted the damn dog instead of acting like his territory was at stake. Because Nate was alone and seeing Sarah hadn't been half-bad. At least she hadn't quizzed him like his family had the moment he'd stepped foot on the family ranch again.

After so many years surrounded by other men, of living and working with other soldiers at his side, he was alone. His family were like strangers to him; he had no one to talk to, *no one he wanted to talk to*, and seeing Sarah had been the first time he'd cracked a smile in what seemed like forever.

But instead of calling her back, he watched her walk away. And it felt like they'd just gone back in time six years, when he'd told her that he was staying with the army instead of coming home. When he'd ended their relationship for good.

Sarah touched the top of her dog's head before sending him away in front of her. She tried to focus on him bounding ahead, tail wagging back and forth. But the only thing she could feel, the only thing she could think about, was the man standing behind her.

Nate Calhoun.

After all these years, seeing him for more than a fleeting moment was ... Sarah dug her fingernails into her palm. Refused to turn around to see if he was still standing where she'd left him. Nate had been the love of her life, and no matter how hard she tried to pretend that there was nothing between them anymore, she was still drawn to him like a magnet to metal.

Why after so many years, after he'd left her, could she still not push the man from her mind? When he'd left her brokenhearted, discarded like their romance had been nothing more than a holiday fling.

"Sarah, what are you doing here so early?"

She looked up, forgetting how close she was to the homestead. The ranch house never failed to impress her, had always had a warmth and homeliness about it that she admired, even though it was easily one of the largest homes in Larkville.

"I came to check up on my new horse, but Moose ran after something and I ended up following him."

Kathryn Calhoun leaned against the doorframe, eyebrows drawn together. "What's wrong?"

Sarah sighed. It didn't matter how hard she tried to keep something to herself, she always seemed to wear her emotions all over her face. "I saw Nate."

Kathryn frowned. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah, but ... " What did she say? That she still felt a flutter of something for him, even though she could see from the darkness in his gaze, from the drawn expression on his face, that the old Nate wasn't even in residence anymore? Twenty minutes ago she hadn't even known Nate was home and now ...

"You don't have to tell me, I know," Kathryn told her.

Sarah's face flushed hot, but she bit her tongue, waiting for Kathryn to continue. She liked Kathryn a lot, but it didn't mean she wanted to talk to her about her former flame, especially given she was married to Nate's brother, Holt.

"Sarah, he's changed. He's not the Nate his family knew, and he's not the happy-go-lucky town charmer that everyone seems to remember, either," Kathryn confessed.

Sarah was overcome with a burst of anger, wanting to defend him. "He's been through a lot, so don't we owe it to him to be patient? To give him some space to deal with being back here?"

Kathryn smiled at her, but there was a sadness there that Sarah couldn't miss. "I hope you're right, Sarah. I do. But Holt's not so sure that Nate's ever going to be the same again."

A wet nose thrust into Sarah's hand reminded her that she wasn't alone. "I think that's my cue to go," she told Kathryn. "I'm meeting Johnny to see how he's gotten on with my mare. He started her under saddle for me a few weeks ago."

Sarah waved to Kathryn as she turned, but the smile fled her face as soon as she walked away. *Nate was hurting.* It might have been years since they'd been together, but she still remembered every expression his face had ever worn, how much pain he must be experiencing to hide away in the guesthouse, away from the family he was once so close to.

She threw a stick her dog had dropped at her feet and tried to focus on where she was walking, rather than the man she could see in her mind.

Nate had left her. Nate had walked away and decided not to come home. He wasn't her responsibility and he'd already made that perfectly clear.

So why was her heart racing like it was in a speedway competition, and her mouth so dry it felt like she hadn't consumed water in days?

Because it was Nate Calhoun, and for as long as she was alive she'd never, ever forget him.

CHAPTER TWO

NATE stretched his leg out and practiced some of the exercises he was supposed to be doing, in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure in his head. It didn't work. Instead, he ended up with a throbbing leg and his head pounded harder than before.

He needed to find something else to do, something to focus on, but right now it was too easy to sit under the tree in the shade and think. *And the fact he could see Sarah in the distance wasn't motivating him to move, either.*

He could see her talking to his sister Jess's husband. Johnny was clearly gifted with horses; he could tell that from watching him for only a few minutes. Sarah was leaning against the rail of the corral, one hand on the head of her dog, the other keeping her balanced. He was waiting to see her mount the young horse, to see if she was still as talented in the saddle as she'd been when they were younger. Back then, she'd been easily as good as any of the boys.

"Nate." A gruff voice commanded his attention.

He turned and looked up to see his brother standing behind him, fingers rammed through the loops of his jeans.

"Holt," he replied.

His brother stared off into the distance. It was obvious that he'd been caught out looking at Sarah.

"We see more of Sarah these days than we did for a long while," Holt told him.

Nate tried to act disinterested, but the reality was that he was anything *but* disinterested. Seeing Sarah again had made something within him, something he hadn't felt in a long time, stir to life again. No matter how hard he was trying to force it back down.

"She having her horse broken in here?" Nate asked. He knew from the letters Jess had sent him that her new husband was something of a horse whisperer, but he'd never had the chance to get to know him.

Holt dropped to his haunches, plucking at a blade of grass and avoiding eye contact. Suited Nate fine. The last thing he wanted was to be interrogated again.

"Johnny's giving her a hand. It's nice to see her smiling again."

Nate raised an eyebrow in question, met his brother's gaze when he looked up.

"You don't know about her and Todd, do you?" Holt asked.

Nate shook his head, slowly. "What do I need to know about her and Todd?" He hated the guy, even though he couldn't blame him. Sarah had married one of his best friends, and he'd never forgiven either of them.

"Look, Nate," Holt began, standing up again and fidgeting like the last thing he wanted was to have a conversation about Sarah and her husband. "Todd's out of the picture, that's all I'm saying. I thought you'd want to know, but if you want details, then I think you should ask Sarah. It's her story to tell."

Nate couldn't help the frown that took over his mouth. "So you're fine with telling me her marriage is over but you're not going to tell me what happened and why?"

Holt sighed. It wasn't something he remembered his brother doing often. "Nate, there's no reason to go jumping down my throat. I just don't think it's my place to tell you, okay?"

He swallowed what felt like a rock. Tried to channel his focus into the dull thud in his leg, anything other than ripping into his brother again.

"I'm sorry." Nate choked out the apology, knowing he'd been a jerk.

Holt held up his hands. "Yeah, I'm sorry, too. I just thought that if there was any unfinished business between you—"

"There's not," Nate interrupted, hearing the sharpness of his own tone.

He watched the expression change on his brother's face and hated that they were acting like strangers. Or maybe Holt wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary, but *he* sure was. They'd been as close as brothers could be once, had spent day after day together, been inseparable. Like his buddies in the army, Holt had always been there for him no matter what, and vice versa.

But now Nate had changed so much he didn't know if he'd ever be that brother to any of his siblings. Not ever again.

Holt walked backward, but he'd turned before Nate could apologize again, and he didn't even know where to begin, anyway.

So Sarah and Todd were over. He looked down and watched her, realizing it was she who was on the horse's back now. Elegant as ever, sitting straight and comfortable in the saddle, at ease with what she was doing.

He didn't need to know that Sarah wasn't spoken for any longer. He didn't need to watch her, or talk to her, or *anything* her now that he was back home. He had his family to deal with, twin siblings that he hadn't even met yet and a bunch of memories that kept him from slumber night after night after night.

Yet his legs were throbbing not from the pain right now, but from a desperate need to cross the field and seek out Sarah.

Just like he had as a lovesick teenager twelve years ago when he'd first seen her taking a riding lesson in the same corral she was in now.

Sarah nudged the young mare on. It was her first solo ride on Maddie, but she was responding beautifully, even leading the other horse beside them.

She gulped, trying not to think too hard about what she was doing. The last thing she needed was for Maddie to feel her nervousness and think it had something to do with their ride.

He was still there. The young man she'd known to never stand still for more than a moment, not able to stay in the same place because there was always something to do, was sitting where she'd left him, leaning against the tree like he had no purpose.

Sarah didn't bother calling out to him, because even though his head was down she knew he'd have heard her. Instead, she walked the horses straight over to him, never taking her eyes from his lone figure.

She'd been wallowing in her own self-pity, thinking she'd been hard done by. Seeing Nate and the change in him told her what she'd been through was nothing in comparison.

"Let's go, cowboy," Sarah ordered once she reached him, in a voice far more confident than she felt inside.

Nate's gaze made her smile wobble. It was as if a storm had brewed within him and was searching to exit through his eyes—eyes that had once been soft and loving now tumultuous and dangerous.

"You want me to ride?"

She held out the reins to the horse. It was one of Johnny's own, and he'd promised she'd be nice and quiet. Sarah had no idea how long it had been since Nate had ridden.

"It'll do us both good," she assured him.

Nate shook his head, before pulling his hat back over his short crop of hair, stretching and standing. "In case you haven't noticed," he said in a voice laced with ice, "I'm not exactly capable these days."

Sarah forced herself to look into his eyes, to not be scared off by his behavior. If he was trying to push her away, to make her scurry back to where she'd come from, then he was doing a darn good job. Except for the fact he was forgetting how determined she had to be with the kids in her classroom. Bullying and bad behavior didn't get her pupils anywhere, and just because he was a wounded soldier didn't mean he was going to get any special treatment.

“So you limp? I can see that for myself without you pointing it out, but I wouldn’t have thought you’d let it stop you.” Sarah’s hands were shaking but she wasn’t backing down. *This was Nate, for goodness’ sake!*

“Sarah ...”

“No, Nate, no,” she insisted. “You can ride without stirrups, whatever, but I think it’ll do you good.”

He squinted up at her, his face showing the full force of his anger. “You been talking to my family?”

She thrust the reins down into his hands now he was closer. “Why, you been as rude to them as you’re being to me right now?”

Nate’s face crumpled, like a hard shell that had just been shattered, a snail dropped to the concrete from a bird’s beak. “Damn it, Sarah, I’m sorry. I—”

She held up her hand to silence him. “There’s time for apologies later, Nate, from both of us, but right now I just want you to get back in the saddle.”

Nate looked at her, stayed still for a heartbeat, before throwing the reins over the horse’s neck and positioning himself on the left-hand side. She couldn’t help thinking that he was lucky he’d injured his right leg, otherwise he’d have found it hard to mount, but she turned away before he caught her watching. Gave him a moment to right himself before she faced him again.

“No stirrups, you reckon?” he asked, a glimmer of the old Nate flickering in his voice.

Sarah shrugged. “Whatever’s most comfortable. I thought we’d just go for a nice long walk, give this one a bit of mileage.”

Nate’s focus turned to the horse she was riding. “Young?”

“Yep, just started under saddle a few weeks ago, so she’s doing pretty well,” she told him. “I’ve had her since she was a baby, and now it’s time to see if she’s too much of a handful for me or not.”

Nate pushed his foot into the stirrup on her side. She imagined he did the same on the other side or tried to from the grimace on his face, but he didn’t say anything. Pushing his heel down would no doubt be painful, but until he was ready to talk, she wasn’t going to ask. *Anything*. He’d tell her what had happened to his leg when he was good and ready.

“Tell me what you’ve been up to?” Nate was obviously trying to make an effort.

Sarah didn’t want to talk about herself, had liked the neutral territory of horses. “Oh, you know, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Nate looked sideways but his focus was clearly on the horse now.

“Have you ridden since you left?”

“Nope.” Nate stroked one hand down the animal’s neck. “I guess it’s one of those things that you never forget how to do, though, right?”

“So I hear you’re—”

“What do you—”

They both laughed. “Sorry,” Sarah said with a laugh as they spoke at the same time. “You go first.”

Nate looked like he was about to object, to tell her to go first, when his face visibly softened. Almost looked pained before he spoke.

“I hear you’re no longer with Todd.”

Sarah focused on the inhale and exhale of air as it whooshed through her lungs. She hadn’t expected him to know. “You found that out between us talking earlier and now?” She had no idea who would have told him. “And here I was thinking you’d been sitting under that tree minding your own business all morning.”

Nate’s body visibly stiffened and he looked off into the distance. “It’s none of my business, Sarah, you’re right. I just wanted to tell you I was sorry.”

Sorry that her marriage was over or sorry that he'd walked off and left her to marry Todd in the first place?

"It's fine," she lied, fixing a sunny smile on her face, not wanting to be drawn back into the past. "Todd and I weren't meant to be, that's all." She omitted the part about him running off with another woman who was already carrying his baby, about how he'd ripped her heart out with his lies and left her without a backward glance as if their marriage had meant nothing.

"So nothing else happening around here I should know about?" Nate asked her, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Other than the Fall Festival?" she mused. "Well, there's a few new people in town, but other than that, we're just the same as usual here in Larkville, I guess."

They rode side by side, far enough apart that there was no danger of them bumping knees, but close enough that it made talking easy. She noticed his foot was dangling from the stirrups now and she wondered if he'd done the same on the other side.

"Who knows about my twin siblings?"

Sarah bit down on the inside of her mouth, needing a moment to consider her reply. *Jess, Nate's sister, had told her about the secret Calhoun children and what had happened, but she hadn't expected Nate to bring it up out of the blue.*

"You haven't long found out, have you?" she asked him gently.

Nate glanced her way, made brief eye contact before fixing his stare forward again. "I wasn't contactable for a while, so I won't lie and say the news didn't come as a shock when they finally tracked me down and told me."

Sarah swallowed, uncomfortable. "Not everyone knows, but I've seen a lot of your family lately, and Ellie and I have become great friends. She's wonderful, Nate. I think if you gave her a chance you'd really enjoy her company. Maybe not as your sister straightaway, but as a nice friend at least."

He laughed. A cruel laugh that she didn't recognize. "Right now I can't even spend time with the siblings I grew up with, so what makes you think I'd do any better with a stranger?"

"Don't talk like that, Nate. Just don't." Tears flooded Sarah's eyes but she refused to let them spill over. She'd promised herself years ago that she'd never shed a tear over Nate Calhoun ever again, and just because the circumstances were different didn't change anything.

"I think we should head back," he announced, turning his horse in the direction they'd come in.

Sarah halted her horse and paused a moment before following him, whistled to her dog to call him over. This wasn't the Nate she'd known, and it sure as hell wasn't a Nate she could ever have imagined returning home. Sarah tried to quell the anger rising within her, anger toward Nate that she'd long held in check.

If she wasn't on a newly broken horse she would have cantered off with her head held high and left him, but with the way her mount was starting to dance on the spot beneath her, she wasn't going to push her luck. Not on her first ride.

Sarah trotted after Nate's retreating figure and contemplated pushing him clean out of the saddle. A smile played across her lips. *Returned wounded soldier or not, a slap across the cheek and a shove off his horse was probably exactly what Nate needed. Not that she'd ever be that game.*

"Nate, wait up!" she called.

He didn't stop, but she could see the slight turn of his head telling her he'd heard her.

"This is stupid," she told him.

"What is?" he asked, a scowl crossing his face. A face that even with a more weathered appearance, with soft crinkles alongside his eyes and faint dark marks beneath his bottom lashes, was still ridiculously handsome.

"You behaving like this, us acting like nothing has happened one minute, then you clamming up the next."

She could see the tautness in his jaw, that he was probably grinding down on his teeth, a hollowness in his eyes that she wished wasn't there. "I'm not the man I used to be, Sarah. That's the truth of it, and there's nothing I can do to change that."

Sarah shook her head, sadness flooding her again. "I don't believe you, Nate," she told him. "I know you've seen awful things, that you're struggling with something right now and that you've been injured, but I believe the old Nate is still in there. Somewhere." She sighed, forcing herself to continue. "I don't know what happened to you over there, Nate, but don't give up on yourself yet. Okay?"

Nate didn't respond and she was too choked up to say anything else. So they rode in silence. Him on his borrowed mount, her trying to keep up, and her dog running along beside them without a care in the world.

Nate knew he'd been rude to Sarah, and she didn't deserve it. But he was all out of apologies, of trying to figure out the right thing to say. When all he wanted was to be left the hell alone.

He cleared his throat, knowing he needed to say *something* before he lost his chance and she walked from the barn and out of his life again for good. He'd already pushed her away once, and he didn't need another black mark on his conscience.

"Sarah," he started, running a hand through his longer than usual hair.

She stopped and turned to him, her face tilted up to look him in the eye. Next to him she seemed tiny, fragile. In reality she was tall and willowy, but in flat boots she seemed much shorter than he remembered.

"I, well, I'm not myself right now, Sarah. I didn't mean to snap at you before, but I can't deal with any of this. Okay?" Nate knew it was a terrible apology, but it was the best he could come up with right now.

"I know you're hurting, Nate," she responded, closing the distance between them to touch his arm, to tighten her fingers against his skin.

He looked into her eyes, into deep amber eyes that had haunted him for years ... in his sleep, while he was awake, when he had nothing else to do but think about what he'd left behind in his determination to fight for a greater cause, to serve his country in the absolute best way he could.

If only it was someone as sweet as Sarah who haunted his nights now. No longer dreams, but nightmares that relentlessly kept him awake night after long night.

"Nate?" Sarah was still touching him, her grip heating his skin.

He untangled himself. He had no other choice. Sarah touching him was too real; he didn't want to feel human again, preferred the dull deadness he'd become used to. He didn't want to acknowledge how kind she was being to him when he knew how badly he must have hurt her.

"I'm here for you, Nate. If you want to talk, if you need anything, don't be a stranger."

Sarah's eyes were kind, the smile kicking up her lips so pure that he wished he had the guts to grab hold of her and not let her go. To fold her slender body against his and cradle her, to remember what they used to have, the man he used to be. To make him feel less like damaged goods and more like a human being again.

"Thanks," he managed, his voice a husky octave lower than usual.

Sarah's fingers skipped across his upper arm and she left, walked from the barn leading her young mare, ready to turn her out in the field again.

Nate stared after her until she disappeared, eyes caught by the softness of her silhouette. Slim-fitting T-shirt, worn jeans that she obviously found comfortable to ride in and that darn dog sticking close to her like he viewed Nate as an imminent danger.

Would she still use her maiden name? Nate forced the question from his mind, trying to refocus on the horse he was supposed to be brushing down.

So she was single again? What difference did it make to him? Nate had made a choice six years ago, and as far as he could tell, there was no going back from that.

Not now and not ever.

Sarah pulled out a chair from the table and dragged it across the room. She stood on it, rummaged around in the high cupboard and yanked out what she'd known to be hidden there.

She shouldn't be looking at it, not after all these years, but seeing Nate had brought back a flood of memories that she couldn't help but want to revisit. When she was married to Todd, she'd done her best to put the past behind her, but now ...

Sarah smiled as she flicked to the first page. Hearts doodled in pink pen, Nate's name written in curly letters that she'd thought were fancy at the time. There were pictures of them on the ranch and hanging out with friends, notes he'd written her back when they'd been in class. *She'd kept them all*, even after she'd married Todd and they'd moved in together, when she'd known they should have been forgotten about.

She turned to the last page, needing to wipe the smile off her face by reminding herself why they'd broken up.

Nate had looked so handsome that day, dressed in his uniform, cheeky smile on his face as he'd turned toward the camera.

They'd made promises the day he'd left to each other, promised that they'd find a way to stay together no matter what. She'd never wanted to hold him back, *but then he'd always promised he'd come home*. That they'd do whatever it took. Instead, he'd broken her heart, and made her realize that waiting for him had been a big mistake.

Sarah flipped the tattered book shut and left it on the table. Maybe she'd show it to Nate, maybe she wouldn't, but now he was back there was no use trying to run from the past. She'd loved Nate with all her heart, and maybe, just maybe, she'd never stopped.

Sarah walked into the kitchen and made straight for the cake she'd made earlier. She had planned on giving it to Johnny for helping her out with her horse, but she needed a sugar fix and fast.

And not for the first time, she wished she wasn't such good friends with the Calhoun family. It wasn't like she could talk to them about Nate, not when it sounded like he wasn't even on speaking terms with them himself.

CHAPTER THREE

NATE took a deep breath. He wasn't used to being nervous, had spent years being the brave one no matter what the situation, but right now he was knee-shakingly worried.

He raised one hand and knocked lightly on the door, not wanting to alarm his sister or her new husband.

The door opened, only halfway, and Nate looked down to see a little boy with messy blond hair. *His nephew*. For some reason he hadn't expected the boy to answer.

"Hey, Brady." Nate could almost feel his blood pressure dropping from being confronted by a child instead of his little sister. She might be younger than him, but she could be darn bossy, and he was still wondering if he'd done the right thing in turning up. But he couldn't hide away forever, and he was lonely. After so many years in the army, he was equal parts miserable about being alone and relieved not to have to pretend like he was okay to his buddies.

"Tell Holt that he can't keep sneaking in the front door and stealing my chutney!" Jess called out.

Nate smiled. So Holt was still taking Jess's things without asking. Some things never changed. Maybe he *had* missed them.

"Mom, it's not Uncle Holt," Brady called back, grinning as he grabbed Nate's hand and tugged him into the kitchen. "It's—"

The kid didn't have a moment to get the word out.

"Nate!" Jess dropped what she was doing and rushed around the counter to him. "Johnny, turn the television off."

Nate shook his head. "No, don't make a fuss. I just thought I'd take you up on that offer of dinner. If you have enough to spare, that is?"

"Enough to spare?" Jess gave him a hug, her slender arms wrapping right around him, before she pulled back and kissed his cheek. "We always have more than enough to share, especially for my favorite brother."

Nate gulped, pushing away the feeling that he should have stayed home alone. But he couldn't stay there forever, and if he was going to try to make amends, then Jess was the person he wanted to start with. She was his youngest sister, and even though she liked trying to fix other people's problems, for some reason he'd come to her instead of going up to the main house.

"So I'm your favorite brother now?" he joked.

Jess responded with a slap to his arm, followed by a tight, impromptu hug.

One step at a time, or at least that's what he was trying to keep telling himself.

"Nate."

He clasped hands with his brother-in-law, forcing a smile. Nate had nothing against the man, was pleased his sister had found happiness, and he seemed like a good guy; it was just that he wasn't ready for small talk again yet. Especially not with someone he didn't know.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this?" Nate asked Johnny, releasing his palm and stepping back, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I know all about wanting to be alone, so you can come here whenever you want," Johnny told him, slinging an arm around Jess's shoulders. "This one here might try to talk your ear off, but—"

There was a soft tap at the door followed by the creak of it opening. Before Nate could raise an eyebrow at his sister, ask who they were expecting, or even turn, he caught sight of the grimace on Jess's face.

"Are you ...?" Nate didn't even get to finish his sentence.

"Sarah," Jess said with a smile, nudging him on the way past. "I was just about to tell Nate that we were expecting company for dinner, and here you are."

Nate looked at Sarah, at the frozen expression on her face, and then surveyed the room. He should have realized when he'd arrived that something was up. The table was set with pretty napkins that he was certain wouldn't be used on a nightly basis, and even Brady was dressed nice, not in clothes dirty from an afternoon playing outside.

"Nice to see you again, Nate."

Sarah's soft voice pulled him from his thoughts. He had no place being rude to her, giving her the silent treatment, so this was going to have to be his chance to redeem himself.

"You've already seen Sarah since you've been back?" Jess asked.

"I found Sarah under my tree this morning," he told his sister, still not taking his eyes from the woman standing in the entrance to the room, cake held out awkwardly in one hand, bottle of wine clutched in the other.

"Nate, please don't tell me you've forgotten your manners."

Nate laughed. Jess sounded just like their mom. Bossy but saying her words with a smile so it sounded less like an order than it was. He crossed the room and took the plate from Sarah, giving her what he hoped was a warm smile. "Sorry," he muttered.

Sarah looked up, her amber eyes lighter than he'd remembered, her cheeks pink like she was as embarrassed as he was. Nate turned before he stared at her any longer, trying to ignore the way her dark auburn curls brushed her shoulders, or the low scoop-cut of her T-shirt.

"The cake looks, ah, great."

Sarah laughed. "It should do! It's the second one I've made today."

Nate looked over his shoulder to see his sister take the bottle of wine and follow him into the kitchen. Brady was talking flat-stick to Sarah, already dragging her by the hand to the sofa.

Jess prodded him in the back.

"Ow!"

He got a soft kick to the calf in response. Clearly his sister didn't care about him being injured. "It seems a little convenient that you've only just come home and yet you managed to find Sarah sitting under your tree already. Is that why you showed up here tonight?"

Nate crossed his arms over his chest as Jess moved around to stand in front of him. "Give me a break, Jess. Maybe I should have just stayed home." He was tempted to wave them all good-night right now and leave them to their dinner, and that was before his sister had started to interrogate him.

"All I'm saying is that Sarah's been hurt enough this past year without you coming here and doing the same. Again."

Nate closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He wasn't ready for dealing with this kind of thing, not yet. He didn't have the thoughts inside his head in order, hadn't dealt with what was troubling him, so he couldn't take on anyone else's troubles.

Besides, it was she who'd been sitting under his damn tree!

"I would never hurt Sarah, you know that. And I'm not interested in her that way, not anymore."

Jess shook her head. "You've hurt her before, Nate, and anyone can see the way you two still look at each other."

She was wrong. Jess was way off the mark with that comment. "Do you want me to go?" he asked.

Jess set down the bottle of wine she was still carrying and marched him into the living room. "You're not going anywhere, Nate. It's about time you came back to your family."

Nate groaned. Maybe he should have gone up to the main house, after all. If he was going to make an effort, Holt might have been easier to spend an evening with, and his new wife would surely have been easier on him than Jess was.

Sarah was struggling to engage in conversation. Heck, she was struggling to breathe, so it was no wonder she couldn't speak! Nate was sitting quietly on the other side of the table, his eyes still stormy but without the anger she'd seen flashing there earlier.

“Sarah, would you like some more?”

She locked eyes with Jess, who was staring at her with a smile on her face. Sarah tried hard not to blush, but she'd been caught out watching Nate and now everyone was looking at her. Even little Brady had stopped his chatter.

“Maybe just a little,” she murmured, focusing on spooning more of the chicken and rice dish onto her plate. “It really is great, Jess. I'll have to get the recipe from you one day.”

Nate chuckled. “I think you'll find that there's not a recipe as such.”

Sarah relaxed as the burning heat receded and left her cheeks at a more comfortable temperature. “Sounds like there's a story behind this dish, then?”

Nate straightened and leaned forward slightly, the first time he'd actively engaged without his sister prompting him. Everyone else was silent.

“Mom made this for us when we were young, even though she always moaned about how many chickens she needed to fill us all.”

His smile made Sarah grin straight back at him. It was so nice to see that flicker of ... *Nate*. Him being like this reminded her of how he'd been years ago. Before everything had changed.

“We used to beg her for this every birthday, special occasion, you name it, even when we were growing up,” Jess continued, rising and dropping a kiss to her brother's head as she passed him. “She never did have a recipe for it, because she'd tasted something similar in a Chinese restaurant and this was her trying to replicate it.”

Sarah looked at Nate again. There was a frown starting to drag the corners of his mouth down, but she could see he was trying hard not to pull away from them.

“When Mom died, when I could have thought of so many things, I thought about this,” Nate told them, shaking his head as he pushed his fork around his plate. “One of the first things I thought was that I'd never eat her chicken and rice again. Stupid, I know, but I was so damn hungry at the time, sick of eating crap food where I was posted, that I could almost smell the chickens roasting in her oven. Could see myself sitting in her kitchen as she cooked up a storm around me.”

Sarah couldn't help it, she reached across the table for Nate's hand. He didn't resist, and she needed to touch him. Needed to comfort him when he was so clearly lost. She should have been angry with him, but right now all she could feel was his pain.

“When she confessed to not having an actual recipe, I started to watch her every time she made it,” Jess said, taking over the storytelling. “I used to cook it for Dad sometimes, to remind him of her, and now I can cook it for all of you when we need a little pick-me-up.”

Sarah had no idea how she'd ended up sharing a meal with Nate after all these years, being part of his family again. She moved her hand away from his, but not before squeezing gently.

The look he gave her, the powerful way he seemed to stare straight through her, sent a soft tickle down her back, and she didn't look away.

Right now, it was like a glimpse of what could have been. *If Nate had come home, if he'd never left, they could have been sitting around this table every week. But the one thing that wouldn't change was that there'd be no little Nates sitting with them....*

Sarah glanced at the food on her plate, the extra spoonful she'd only just added, and knew she couldn't eat it. She stood to help Jess clear the table instead, needing a moment away from Nate. Away from the happy family scene that she'd been enjoying so much until her silly fantasy had taken over her thoughts.

It didn't matter that Nate was home, and there was no point even thinking about what could have been. Because the truth was he'd made the decision that he didn't want to be with her when he chose not to come home. And the perfect little family they'd often talked about when they were together? It wasn't even possible.

No matter how badly she wanted children of her own, that wasn't in her future any longer. There was nothing she could do to change that, and she sure didn't want Nate to know about it, either.

“Do you want to cut the cake or shall I?” Jess called out.

Sarah hurried into the kitchen and took a deep breath, relieved to be away from the table even for a moment, before taking the knife and starting to slice into it. “I’m fine doing this, you go and sit down,” she told her friend.

She’d already eaten enough cake to make her stomach ache earlier in the day, yet her brain was trying to tell her she was ready for more comfort food already.

Sarah spun around with a plate in each hand before dropping one with a smash to the floor.

“Nate!” She’d run smack-bang into him, the plates bumping straight into his chest.

He bent to scoop up the fallen slice of cake with one hand, the other collecting what was left of the broken plate.

“I’m sorry, I . . .” Sarah didn’t know what to say, so she put the other plate on the counter and bent down, too, picking up the smaller fragments.

Nate’s hand hovered close to hers, so close she wished he’d touch her, to feel his fingers against her skin. Like a drug she’d long given up but was so overwhelmingly tempted to consume again.

“Everything okay in there?”

“Fine,” Nate called back to his sister.

Only Sarah wasn’t so sure things were fine. Her heart was beating hard and fast, and her stomach was flipping at a rapid rate. She held the broken pieces of plate in her hands before braving a glance at Nate, and finding him looking straight back at her. His blue eyes icy as he stared.

“Sarah.” He stated her name, like he wanted to say something else but couldn’t figure out what or how to go about it.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” Sarah’s question came out as a whisper.

“Now?”

She nodded. Nate plopped the cake on the remainder of the plate he held and offered her his arm, careful to keep his sticky cake fingers away from her. Sarah accepted his help but didn’t look him in the eye again. Didn’t connect with him or touch him in any other way, because she was starting to feel so out of her depths, so weak, that she was terrified.

They both rinsed and dried their hands in silence.

“Jess, we’re going for a walk,” Nate told his sister, calling out but not moving. “Be back soon.”

Sarah followed his lead, heading out the back door. And when his fingers brushed hers, the most gentle of touches as they walked together, hands hanging at their sides, she didn’t pull away. They curled against her own, fingers so close to interlinking they were halfway to holding hands, before the moment was over and she was left with a shiver crossing her shoulders as the wind touched her bare skin instead.

CHAPTER FOUR

NATE buried his hands deep in his pockets to avoid doing anything with them he'd regret. What was he thinking, reaching out to Sarah like that? He hadn't just come home to his sweetheart and he needed to remember it. But the pull toward the woman beside him was almost impossible to ignore.

"I'm sorry if I ruined your night."

Sarah's softly spoken words made Nate stop walking. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She wrapped her arms around herself, like she was trying to shield her body from danger. "When I arrived and saw you there, I don't know ... it just felt like I was intruding. And I know you haven't seen much of your family since you've been home."

Nate started to walk again. He didn't want to do this. Didn't want to talk about his feelings, or why he was so distant with his family, or how conflicted he felt being here with her right now. *Or why it somehow felt right, either.*

Because the truth was he was still angry with Sarah. Even though he knew he'd played his part in what had happened, that he'd been the one to end things, she'd taken a piece of him when she'd married Todd.

Just like Jimmy's death had taken a piece of him, and his parents' dying had smashed away another chunk that would never grow back.

He was a broken man and he knew it.

"No one seems to realize what I've been through, Sarah, and that makes it kind of hard to relax around here." Nate looked away, wondering if he shouldn't have been quite so honest. "I don't feel like I fit in anymore, that I'm part of anything that's happening here now."

Sarah didn't give him time to think about it. She was at his side, hand clasped around his wrist, tugging him around. Not letting him continue.

"How can they know anything about what you've been through if you don't explain that to them?" she asked, her voice low.

He wished he wasn't staring into her eyes, wished he could ignore what she was saying and walk away, but he couldn't.

"Sarah, I can't go there," he told her, his voice rough with the honesty of his words.

She didn't break eye contact with him. "Can't or won't, Nate?"

Nate faltered, a lump of emotion forming in his throat and threatening to choke him. "What happened over there, what I've ..." He stopped talking as abruptly as he'd started. "I'm sorry."

Nate walked away, because he didn't need anyone seeing him like this, seeing the way he couldn't deal with what was going on in his own head. Didn't need to relive what had happened, not again. *He already did that every time he shut his eyes.*

"Nate." Sarah was in front of him again, blocking his path, the gentle way she said his name making him turn.

Then she did something he really hadn't seen coming. She thrust her arms around his neck, pulling him in tight for an embrace he was powerless to evade. Held him like he hadn't been held since the last time he'd seen his mom, the kind of hug that forced his body to relax and be comforted. The kind of hug that would once have made him feel loved.

"You're home, Nate," she whispered in his ear. "You're home and you need to remember that. Home is where the heart is, and that's right here on this ranch with your family."

He didn't know if it was the smell or feel of Sarah in his arms, the safeness of being cocooned by her, or just being held by another human being, but Nate was fighting a losing battle.

When she tipped back, looked up at him for the briefest of moments before pulling away, he did something he'd thought about for longer than he could remember. Something that he'd never forgotten, a memory he'd never let go.

Nate reached out to stop her, his palm tucked to the back of her head, holding her in place. *And then he kissed her.* Brought his mouth toward hers before she had a second to see it coming, to resist him, and touched his lips to hers.

Sarah sighed into his mouth, slipped her hands around his waist, pillowy lips brushing like the softest of feathers against his. Mouths grazing together in the most gentle, intimate of dances. Until she pulled back like she'd only just realized what had happened.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you," Sarah said in a low voice, slowly removing her hands from his waist and crossing her arms across her chest instead.

Nate swallowed hard and looked down at Sarah. She looked tiny yet brave at the same time, stronger than he'd probably ever given her credit for. He wished he could snatch her hands back and plant them on his hips again, but he fisted his own hands at his sides instead.

"For the record, I don't forgive you, either." And he didn't, it was true. Forgiving her or not had nothing to do with kissing her. That was something he'd *needed* to do, and it had sure taken his mind off everything else that had been troubling him.

"I think we should head back," Sarah told him, angling with her head over at Jess's house. They had walked a short distance away, but even in the pitch-black the house was clearly visible. Lights illuminating every window, glowing as if inviting them to enter.

It was the sort of homely scene that should have tugged him back into the life he'd once yearned for. The life that he'd imagined going back to once he'd served his country, before everything had changed forever.

Nate tried not to let his pain show as he walked beside Sarah. Sometimes it was the pain within him, the pressure in his head, the stabbing betrayal and loneliness that constantly hurt him, far worse than the physical pain in his leg.

"So are you here riding again tomorrow?" Nate asked Sarah, needing to break the silence more to get away from his own thoughts than to fill the air around them with words.

Sarah smiled, shyly, and he knew she'd be blushing if only he could see her cheeks. It was dark now, but still light enough that he could make out her features.

"It's summer vacation for me, so I'll be riding as much as I can over the next month."

Nate nodded. "You love being a teacher as much as you always thought you would?" He'd always remember how much Sarah loved children, how she'd always wanted to be a teacher in their small town, taking all the younger ones under her wing. Children had always flocked to her like a honeybee to pollen.

"It can be hard work, probably harder than I ever thought it would be, but there's nothing more rewarding that I could imagine doing," she told him, walking faster than before.

Nate laughed, finally starting to relax in her company. "All you're missing are the four kids of your own, right?"

The smile fell from his face as Sarah's arms wrapped around herself again. She didn't make eye contact, acted like she hadn't even heard what he'd said, or like he'd said something he should have kept to himself.

"I'm sorry," he said, running a hand back and forth through his hair. What the hell had he been thinking, saying something like that? "Just because Todd wasn't the one doesn't mean you won't have everything you dreamed of one day, Sarah."

She faced him, stopping just ahead of him, a tight smile greeting him as he watched her face. "Not everything turns out the way we want, Nate. We both know that."

Nate tried not to grind his teeth, tried to ignore the discomfort of what they were suddenly talking about even as it drilled through his body. *Once, there were so many things he'd have said to Sarah. So many things he would have apologized for, promises he could have made. But not now. Once, he'd have known why his words had stung her like they so obviously had, too.*

“You’re right,” he said, instead of any of the other thoughts going through his mind. “It was nice seeing you again, Sarah. If you wouldn’t mind telling Jess for me that I’ve called it a night, I’d really appreciate it.”

He continued to stare at her face, seeing the hurt that he was powerless to do anything about.

“Goodbye, Nate.” Sarah shook her head, just the barest of motions, but she didn’t turn away.

But he did. Before she told him something he didn’t want to hear, or he said something he’d only regret later. Nate walked away, knowing that he needed to get back to the guesthouse, to be alone to deal with what he needed to think through.

Alone.

He repeated the word in his mind until he heard Sarah walk away, too.

Sarah fiddled with her keys. She’d been jangling them in her palm since she’d left the house, and now she was standing beside her car trying to make a decision she shouldn’t even be considering.

What was it about Nate Calhoun that still made her twist up in knots like this?

Sarah sighed and decided to drive as close as she could to his place and walk the rest of the way. She had a piece of cake wrapped up that she wanted to give him, since he’d missed dessert, and for some reason she wasn’t sure that he was in the right frame of mind to be left alone.

He wasn’t her problem anymore, but she still wanted to help. Because she knew what it was like to be left, to deal with secrets and feel like there was no one in the world who would understand. She needed to keep swallowing her anger, wait until the right time to confront him with her pain, with her questions. *And that time wasn’t now.*

Sarah parked her car less than a minute’s drive away from Jess’s place, and walked quickly toward the small house Nate was staying in. There was only one room illuminated in the dark, the window coverings pulled to mute the light, but still enough for her to see the way.

What would he be doing? Watching television, reading a book, staring into space?

Sarah summoned all the courage she could muster and raised her hand to knock on the door. There was no answer. She tapped again, harder this time, wishing the door wasn’t made of solid timber so she could look in and see if he was there. Peer in and make sure she’d made the right decision in coming here instead of driving to the safety of home. As far away from Nate as possible.

She went to knock again before the door was flung back, nearly sending her spiraling forward into the house.

“What do you ...?” Nate’s angry question trailed off when he saw her.

Sarah stared at him, unsure what to say. He’d been crying. *Nate had been crying.* The same Nate who she’d never seen cry in all the years she’d known him. His eyes were bloodshot as he swiped his face with the back of his hand, trying to remove any evidence of the tears she’d seen sticking to his skin.

“Nate, if this is a bad time ...” she managed.

His dark laugh sent shivers across her skin. “It’s always a bad time for me lately.”

She wondered who he’d thought it was when he’d opened the door as angry as a disturbed, hibernating bear. But she knew that if he truly wanted to be left alone, if he enjoyed being locked away from the world as much as he was pretending to, then he never would have answered the door.

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