

HIS LOST AND FOUND FAMILY

Sarah M. Anderson



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Аннотация

A secret baby brings ex-lovers together in this tale of lost memories and second chances. Getting hit with divorce papers isn't the fresh beginning Jake Holt wanted with Skye Taylor. But when he returns to their Texas hometown, he finds Skye has a child...and no memory of the couple's painful breakup. After a long coma, Skye doesn't remember being swept up in a tornado or nearly losing her baby girl. Seeing Jake again rekindles their all-consuming passion. Then she starts to remember... Is their love strong enough to overcome the past so they can become a real family?

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“Stop!”

Skye looked around and was surprised to see that she recognized the road they were on. Now was as good a time as any to start making some new memories.

“What?” Jake asked in alarm as he slammed on the brakes.

“We used to park here, remember?” She undid her seat belt and slid over to him. “We used to stop here on the way home.”

She grinned nervously at him. Yes, she wanted to get home to Grace, but she’d been in a bed—by herself—for the past four months. It was time to fix that starting right *now*.

Jake was stiff in her arms. “We did,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Are you going to kiss me, Jake Holt?” she whispered against his lips.

He turned his head. “The doctor said—He said we shouldn’t stress you out too much. Physically.”

Skye sighed in disappointment. “Not even if I want to be stressed? Just a little? Not even a kiss?”

Jake didn’t reply for a moment. Then he sort of chuckled and said, “When we used to stop here, I don’t remember it ever being *just* a kiss.”

* * *

His Lost and Found Family

is part of the Texas Cattleman’s Club: After the Storm series

—As a Texas town rebuilds, love heals all wounds ...

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Sarah M. Anderson



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Award-winning author **SARAH M. ANDERSON** may live east of the Mississippi River, but her heart lies out west on the Great Plains. With a lifelong love of horses and two history teachers for parents, she had plenty of encouragement to learn everything she could about the tribes of the Great Plains.

When she started writing, it wasn't long before her characters found themselves out in South Dakota among the Lakota Sioux. She loves to put people from two different worlds into new situations and to see how their backgrounds and cultures take them someplace they never thought they'd go.

Sarah's book *A Man of Privilege* won the 2012 RT Reviewers' Choice Award for Best Mills & Boon® Desire™. Her book *Straddling the Line* was named Best Mills & Boon® Desire™ of 2013 by CataRomance, and *Mystic Cowboy* was a 2014 Booksellers' Best Award finalist in the Single Title category.

When not helping out at her son's school or walking her rescue dogs, Sarah spends her days having conversations with imaginary cowboys and American Indians, all of which is

surprisingly well-tolerated by her wonderful husband. Readers can find out more about Sarah's love of cowboys and Indians at sarahmanderson.com.

To my agent, Jill Marsal, who saved this book and quite possibly my career by keeping calm and carrying on, even when I couldn't. You've made me a better writer, and it's a joy to work with you!

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Extract

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One

Jake Holt could not believe his eyes. What on God's green earth had happened to Royal, Texas?

Yeah, he'd been gone for four years after cutting off all contact with his family and his hometown. He expected some things to have changed. But this? He drove down what had been the main commercial drag. Fast-food restaurants and big-box stores all looked like someone had run over them with a freight train. He passed the hospital, where it looked as if a whole wing was missing.

Jesus. It looked as if a bomb had gone off here. Or...

Or a tornado had blown the town to bits.

The thought made him nervous. Jake cast a withering glance at the papers in the benign-looking envelope on the passenger seat. Divorce papers. Skye had sent him divorce papers. He probably shouldn't be surprised—he hadn't spoken to her in almost ten months. He'd been out of the country, setting up an IT at a new oil site in Bahrain. He'd been busy and she'd made her feelings clear.

Part of him knew the marriage was over. They wanted different things. He wanted to be free of their families and their never-ending feud over land. He wanted to wash his hands of Royal, Texas, for good. He'd wanted to get his business, Texas Sky Technologies, off the ground, which required a lot of hard

work. He'd wanted to be a success and give her everything she wanted.

Except he couldn't. Skye wanted the impossible. She hadn't been able to let go of the crazy notions she'd had about coming back home and resolving the family feud and somehow bringing the Taylors and Holts together. He didn't know why. Maybe so they could join hands and sing in perfect harmony and share a soda together.

No matter what her reasons, it wasn't going to happen. The Taylors and the Holts had been arguing, suing and occasionally shooting over the same piece of land for at least a hundred years and nothing Jake did or said was going to change that. Hell, he couldn't even get his own family to accept that he'd fallen in love with Skye Taylor. How was he supposed to convince her parents to accept him as a son-in-law?

Easier just to pick up and start over somewhere new.

Or it had been, until it all fell apart.

Still, Jake could not believe that she'd actually had him served with divorce papers. Skye had been his world for so long. They'd sacrificed everything to be together once.

The papers were dated eight months ago. Jake wasn't about to sign the damn things and mail them off. Not until he made good and sure that Skye was done with him.

Which was why he was back in his least favorite place in the entire world—Royal, Texas. If Skye could tell him to his face that it was over, then it was over. Twenty years of his life spent

loving her—done.

God, he hated this town.

He'd come home after all these years on the assumption that Skye was here. But now? Now he hoped she *wasn't* here. It looked as if the tornado that had blown through town had left a wake of complete and total destruction in its path.

Despite the long months apart, and the evil divorce papers, he prayed she wasn't here, that wherever she was, she was safe. That she hadn't been in the path of that twister.

He didn't even know when the twister had hit. He was jumping to conclusions, but the whole prodigal-son-returns-home thing had him on edge. He needed information before he did anything else. And the best place to get information in this town was the Royal Diner.

As he headed into the heart of the town, the damage got worse and worse. Trees were gone, nothing but twisted stumps left. The car lot where he'd bought his first truck was vacant, save a pile of rubble where the building used to stand. Plenty of places had tarps over their roofs and boarded-up windows. The walk-up ice-cream shop where he used to take Skye for a cone was off its foundation entirely, sitting four feet away on the sidewalk where he'd dared to hold Skye's hand in public.

He'd turned his back on this town four years ago. Said he didn't care if he never saw Royal—or the people in it—ever again. But now that he was here, it was almost too much.

Just when he thought he couldn't take it, he came upon a

block that was mostly okay looking. Jake was thrilled to see the Royal Diner was still standing. People were sitting inside, drinking coffee.

He felt himself breathe. It wasn't all gone. The diner was still here.

He pulled up in front and sat, thinking. He didn't want to care about Royal, Texas, because he'd told himself for years that he *didn't* care.

But seeing the town so wounded, and not knowing who'd lived and who'd died—it tore him up in a way he wasn't prepared for. He was worried about his family, for God's sake. He was worried about Skye. Just because it was over didn't mean he hoped something awful had happened to her.

Someone walked past his car and did a double take. Jake didn't recognize the man, but then, he didn't recognize the town anymore. Things had changed.

He needed to know how *much* they'd changed. Forewarned was forearmed and he needed to know what had happened before he sucked it up and went home.

So, gritting his teeth, Jake got out of the car and walked into the diner.

What had been a pleasant midday hum died the moment the door shut behind him. He recognized Amanda working behind the counter, although he was surprised to see she was pregnant.

“Jake? Jake *Holt*?” She froze in what seemed to be true shock—or horror. “Is it really you?”

“Hi,” Jake said, putting on a smile as the silence closed around him. He could feel the shock rolling off of every single person in the restaurant. Even the cook leaned out of the kitchen to look at him.

He’d been in tight spots before, dealing with angry international businessmen who didn’t speak much English and had their own ways of doing things. But this? This was the tightest spot he’d ever been in.

“What?” someone demanded from one of the booths in the back of the diner. “Did someone say Jake *Holt*?”

Then, to Jake’s surprise, his brother, Keaton, stood up.

“Jake?” Keaton looked at him as if Jake were a zombie who’d stumbled into the diner fresh from the graveyard. “What the hell?”

Jake looked around the room, but he found no moral support. Everyone appeared to be thinking the same thing. Even Amanda, who’d always been a sweetheart back in school.

This was not how he’d wanted it to go. He’d wanted to locate Skye and hash it out for once and for all in *private* with no one—or at least not their families—the wiser. He wanted things to go back to the way they used to be, back when it was him and Skye against the world. And if he had to confront his family, then he’d wanted it to happen in the privacy of the Holt home, without an audience.

Which is what he had right now—one hell of an audience. The diner was mostly full with the lunch crowd. Plenty of witnesses

with wagging tongues who would probably be more than happy to spread the news of the less-than-happy family reunion from here to San Antonio.

Damn.

“Hello, Keaton.” Jake tried to sound as if he were glad to see his brother, but he didn’t pull it off.

The diner was so quiet he could have heard a pin drop. He wasn’t sure anyone was even breathing.

Keaton’s jaw was clenched—and so were his fists. Yeah, this wasn’t a happy family reunion by any stretch of the imagination. “Where have you been?” To his credit, at least it didn’t come out as a snarl.

“Bahrain,” Jake replied, trying to keep his tone casual. After all, he was basically announcing this to the whole town. “I had a big job there. It just wrapped up.”

A light murmur rippled through the onlookers. Jake couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“I heard about the storm,” he went on. Might as well put some lipstick on this pig. “I came home as soon as I could to see if I could help.”

More murmuring. At least this time, it sounded like a positive reaction.

Keaton gave him a look of white-hot death, but then he seemed to realize that they had an audience. “Do you have time to have a cup of coffee?” He motioned back to the booth.

“Sure.” Just a casual cup of joe with the man who’d forced

Jake to choose between the Holt land and the woman he loved. No big deal.

He walked past his brother and slid into the opposite side of the booth. Keaton stood there, glaring down at him for a moment before he took his seat.

The diner was still unnaturally quiet—so quiet, Jake could hear Amanda’s footsteps coming toward. “Coffee?”

He tried to be polite. “Sure. I take it you’re not Amanda Altman anymore, huh?”

“Been married to Nathan Battle for over a year,” she said with an awkward grin.

Jake nodded, hoping the gesture concealed his surprise. He’d thought they’d broken up a long time ago. “That’s great. Congratulations.”

“It’s good you’re back, Jake,” Amanda said. She paused and then, after a worried glance at Keaton, added, “Things may have changed, but it’s still good to come home.”

He forced a polite smile. “Not sure how long I’ll be here,” he said. “But I’ll do my best to help out.”

Amanda gave him a look before the cook rang the bell and yelled, “Order up!”

And then it was him and Keaton. His brother had changed, but then, hadn’t everything? Fine lines had settled in around his eyes and his mouth. They might have been the lines that went with smiling. Maybe Keaton had been happy after Jake had slipped off into the night with Skye four years ago. Maybe he’d gotten

married, had some kids. Had a nice life. Jake could be a big enough man to hope for that.

There were no smiles now.

Jake took a sip of his coffee and felt something inside him unclench. He'd had coffee the world over, but there was something about the coffee at the diner that tasted like...

Like home.

He was not going to be glad to be back, no matter what Amanda said. And he was not staying long, either. The look on Keaton's face made it plenty clear he wasn't welcome. Some things never changed.

Slowly, the noise level in the diner began to return to normal conversation levels. Still, Keaton said nothing. And Jake wasn't about to fill the void. He had *nothing* to say to his brother.

Nothing polite, anyway.

Finally, Keaton cracked. "Bahrain?"

Jake nodded. "I run a successful information technology company that specializes in creating the IT infrastructure on oil drilling sites. We do jobs around the world. The Bahrain job was a major win—I beat out some NASDAQ companies for the right to that job."

Of course, none of that information was exactly secret. If Keaton—or anyone else here in Royal—had really wanted to, they could have searched for Texas Sky Technologies online.

Keaton's jaw worked. "Texas Sky, right?"

Jake stared at him. "You looked me up?" Had his

brother...missed him?

“Yeah, I really had no choice,” Keaton replied with a snort. “Imagine my surprise when the people who answer your phones insisted that you didn’t have a brother. Like I didn’t even exist.”

Okay, so Jake maybe hadn’t talked about his family in warm, glowing terms with his employees, but that didn’t explain why his receptionist hadn’t forwarded the messages.

One other thing was clear from the way Keaton had said he didn’t have a choice—the man hadn’t missed Jake. “Did you ever consider it’s not the rest of the world, Keaton? Maybe you just bring that out in everyone.” He started to slide out of the booth. Sparring with his brother was not getting him any closer to finding Skye. He did not have time for this.

Keaton put up an arm to block Jake’s exit. “How long were you there for?”

Jake was stuck. He’d come in here to get information about Skye and he still had nothing. So he gritted his teeth and settled back in. This was for Skye. “Almost ten months. It was a yearlong contract, but once you factor in the vacation time, it was just short of ten months.”

“So you have no idea, then?”

“No idea about what?” Which pretty much answered the question, but that was all Jake was going to give the man.

“About Skye.”

And just like that, the power balance in the booth shifted.

Jake took in the angry look on Keaton’s face and did what he

had to. He blurred the truth. “Bahrain isn’t exactly a woman’s paradise. She wasn’t up to joining me on this job.”

“I imagine not.”

Jake didn’t like his brother’s sarcastic tone, and fought the urge to lunge over the table and grab Keaton by the collar. He wasn’t the same hotheaded kid. He was a businessman—a darned successful one at that. He could negotiate with businessmen from China to South Africa to Bahrain.

He would not let Keaton win. Not now, not ever.

So he let that nugget sit while he sipped his coffee. “Something you’d like to get off your chest, Keaton?” he finally asked.

“Did you at least have the decency to marry her?”

He. Would. Not. Kill. Keaton.

Not yet, anyway.

“Actually,” Jake said in his coolest voice, “I don’t see what that has to do with you in the least. What goes on between me and Skye is our business. Not yours.” He would absolutely not tell his brother a single iota of information more than he had to—and his questionable marital status was at the top of that list.

“You should have married her.” Keaton made a show of sipping his coffee.

Jake didn’t want to have his brother all up in his business like this. This was not how the plan was supposed to go. He was supposed to swing into Royal, find Skye, confront her if she was here and swing right back out again. Whatever problems he and Skye had were between the two of them. Keaton was not a part

this. No one in their families was.

So much for that plan.

“Again, not your concern.”

“You’re so sure of that, huh?” Keaton shook his head in obvious pity.

Jake bristled. Why was Keaton insisting that he should have married Skye? The man had spent years trying to push Skye and Jake apart—not enter them into holy matrimony. “Positive.”

“Positive,” he said, his tone deadly serious. “Oh, yeah, you’re *positive*! You always did think you knew everything, didn’t you?”

That was it. Jake didn’t have to sit here and take this. Keaton was always doing this—lording it over Jake. Jake hadn’t missed his brother at all in four years. Not once. And this was why.

“Been good seeing you, Keaton. Give my best to Mom and Dad.” He tried to slide out of the booth but Keaton grabbed his shirt. Immediately, the conversation in the diner dropped to an audible whisper.

“I need to congratulate you, Jake.” The sarcasm had slipped back into Keaton’s tone and he had a mean glint in his eye. “You’re a father.”

Jake’s stomach dropped. It couldn’t be true. He and Skye had always been careful, always discussed waiting to start their family until they were a little better situated. No, he wasn’t a father because it just wasn’t possible. Instead, this was Keaton trying to screw with him, as always. He probably didn’t even know where Skye was. “Funny, Keaton. Real funny.” He shook free of his

brother's grip and bolted out of the booth. He tried to smile at Amanda as he all but bulldozed his way out of the diner.

As he walked, his mind raced through the options. He was going to kill his brother. Keaton had always been a jerk about Jake and Skye, but this? This took the cake. Jake was not a father. Skye hadn't been pregnant when they'd called it a day.

Had she?

He thought back to the last time he'd lain in bed with her in his arms. They'd gone out to dinner—a fancy thing, because he was making more money now. Business was good. He was trying to show her that he could take care of her, give her the very best in life. But dinner had been tense. They hadn't spoken much. They'd had sex when they'd gone home, but it'd been...

It'd been missing the spark that had held them together for so long. The evening was supposed to be about showing Skye that they still had something worth saving. But apparently in the end, it'd shown them—her—that what they'd had was already gone.

A few days later, their world had erupted. Skye had insisted that, if Jake loved her, he'd go home to Royal with her and start a family. And Jake had insisted that, if Skye loved him, she never even would have asked him to come back to this pit of a town.

The fight had been—well, he tried not to think about the things he'd said. And he tried extra hard not to think about the things she'd said. He'd gone to a hotel the next morning and left for Bahrain the next week.

He could not be a *father*. He just couldn't be. And if he was

—that was a huge *if*—then Skye had even less business serving him with divorce papers. But he'd had no other contact with her. Not so much as a peep.

So Jake did the only reasonable thing. He ignored his brother—who had followed him out of the diner, calling his name—and kept walking. He wasn't about to sit there and let his brother mock him. There were other ways to find Skye. Ways that did not involve additional humiliation at the hands of Keaton.

He made it to his Porsche Turbo and got the door open before Keaton caught up to him. "Wait," he repeated, shoving the door closed.

"Go to hell. You want to mock me? Fine. But I don't have to sit there and take it. For the record, I didn't come back to Royal for *you*. I didn't come back for Mom and Dad. I came back for Skye and Skye alone. We'll deal with our relationship just like we've always dealt with things—on our own. You and the Taylors and this whole town can go to hell. I'll even buy you a handbasket."

Keaton leaned against the car door so that Jake would have to go through him to open it. Which was an option that was on the table, as far as Jake was concerned. "You pigheaded fool," he started.

"That's how you want to play this? Fine." Jake's hands curled into fists. "You're nothing but a traitor. I wouldn't trust anything you said even if you had it notarized. I tried that once, remember? I trusted you with my deepest secret and what did you do? You ran to Mom and Dad as fast as your chicken legs could carry you.

You tried to break me and Skye up more times than I can count because being a Holt was more important than being with her. You are nothing to me, Keaton. We are not brothers. I am not a Holt. Not anymore.”

If Keaton was insulted by this tirade, he didn't show it. Instead, he just kept on leaning against the door, looking at Jake as if he pitied him.

Jake had dreamed of calling his brother out. *Dreamed* of it. But saying those words to his face didn't leave Jake with a sense of lightness or of closure. He only felt worse. And he'd long since vowed not to feel bad about his family. Those days were over. “Get out of my way, Keaton. Or I will get you out of my way. Last warning.”

“Her name is Grace.”

Grace. He wanted to tell Keaton to go to hell again, but his voice suddenly didn't work, so he settled for glaring.

“She was eleven weeks premature,” Keaton went on. “She was in the neonatal intensive care unit for almost three months.”

Images Jake had seen in movies of tiny little babies hooked up to wires and tubes suddenly overwhelmed him. He struggled to ask, “The—the hospital? Wasn't that hit during the storm?”

“She wasn't in the hospital during the storm.” But damn the man, he didn't elaborate.

They stood there for a moment. Jake realized he was breathing in great gulps, but he couldn't help it.

“Aren't you even going to ask?” Keaton demanded. He

sounded frustrated.

“Ask what?”

“*Anything*, man. You’ve had absolutely no contact with Skye in the last four months—maybe even the whole time you were being a big shot in Bahrain. You obviously have no idea what’s going on.”

“Maybe I do,” Jake snipped, trying to keep his temper under control. He would not give Keaton the satisfaction of getting to him. He would *not*. “Maybe I’ve been texting with Skye this whole time. How would you know?”

“Because,” Keaton replied, anger and exasperation edging his voice, “Skye’s only come out of the medically induced coma the doctor’s had her in a couple of weeks ago. You can’t talk to a woman who’s been unconscious—*oof!*”

Whatever else Keaton was going to say was crushed out of him as Jake grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him back against the car. “She *what?*”

“She’s been out the last four months, Mr. Big Shot,” Keaton said as he tried to push back against Jake’s grip. It didn’t work. “And Grace is yours. She’s a Holt. All the tests came back that she was 99.9 percent positive for being a Holt, which means that her father is either me, Dad or you. And neither Dad nor I have so much as looked at Skye in four years. So it’s you. She’s your baby girl.”

The weight of these words made Jake’s knees weak. He had to step back and lean on the car’s hood to keep his balance.

His baby. His and Skye's. Who'd been in a coma for months. While he'd been working in Bahrain.

Oh, God. What had he *done*?

"Where?" That was all he could get out.

"Skye's still at the hospital. She's awake, but she doesn't remember much of anything that might have happened in the last few years. Couldn't tell us anything about where you *might* be or why."

"And...the baby? Grace?" The name felt strange on his tongue. His baby. Everything about that felt strange.

"Funny thing about her," Keaton said, after a dramatic pause that made Jake want to tear his brother apart. "She's been handed over to the closest living relatives. Which is me and Lark. You remember Skye's older sister?"

"You and...Lark?" The way Keaton had said her name—in the same sentence as his own—there hadn't been any sneer then. None of the mocking tone he'd always used when he talked about the Taylors.

"Yes. Me and Lark. We have her until Skye can take over. Or until your sorry ass showed up."

"You're taking care of Grace? *With* Lark? I thought—I thought you hated the Taylors. You hated them *so* much."

That's why he'd left. He might not care for Skye's family, but he'd loved Skye since he was seven and she was six. She'd always been more to him than a Taylor. She had been his *everything*.

Keaton looked him in the eye. "Things have changed, Jake.

Welcome home.”

* * *

“How are you feeling today?” The man in the white coat smiled at her.

“Better. Less...fuzzy,” Skye replied. Which was the truth. She was sitting up in bed, her eyes open. Her brain was almost working. She felt as close to normal as she had since...since...

Damn. *Almost* working—but not quite.

“Do you remember my name?”

Skye thought. “You’re my doctor? Dr. Wake...” She scrunched up her face as the man gave her a hopeful smile. “Dr. Wakefield? Is that right?”

“Excellent!” He nodded and made a note on the tablet he was carrying. “That’s very good, Skye. Do you remember her name? She’s my research assistant,” he said, handing the tablet to the woman in nurse’s scrubs standing next to him.

The name was there, but it kept slipping through Skye’s mind like a strand of wet spaghetti. Just when she thought she had it, it slipped right past her again. “Julie? Juliet? Jules? Something like that.” She leaned back against the bed. The effort of trying to remember was draining. But she didn’t want to close her eyes. She was *so* tired of sleeping.

“Very good,” Dr. Wakefield. “You got it on the first try—Julie Kingston. What year is it?”

“2013, right?”

Julie and Dr. Wakefield shared a look, which she didn’t like.

She wanted Jake. She wanted out of this hospital. She wanted him right now.

“When is Jake going to get here?” she asked. Because she’d been awake for almost two weeks and he hadn’t shown up yet. She didn’t understand why, but she was sure that if Jake wasn’t here, there had to be a good reason.

“Skye,” Julie said, “can you remember where Jake is?”

“He was...” He’d been somewhere. Somewhere else. But why? Something pulled at her memory, but it wasn’t even a slippery noodle she couldn’t keep a grip on. It was more like a thin line of smoke that vanished as soon as she tried to touch it. “I don’t know.” She hated this feeling, of not knowing what was going on. “His company is just starting to take off. Maybe he got that job in New York? But I thought he’d be back by now...”

“That’s all right,” Dr. Wakefield said in a comforting tone. “Do you remember Grace?”

Skye frowned. They were *always* asking her about Grace. Did she remember Grace? No. Did she remember everyone—the doctors, her sister—asking about Grace? Yes. “She’s my daughter.”

The words made her want to cry. Her baby—the baby she’d wanted for *so* long—and Skye had no recollection of her at all. She didn’t know if her own child was chubby or had hair or looked like Jake or *anything* about her. Just that Grace was her daughter.

“Is the baby okay? Am I well enough to hold her now?”

Dr. Wakefield pressed along her head. There was one area along the side that was still tender. “We have a physical therapy protocol for patients in a coma to keep their muscles from atrophying, but you’ve lost a lot of strength. You should be able to hold Grace as long as you’re sitting, with pillows to help bolster your arms.” He gave her an apologetic smile. “It’ll be some time before you can carry her. I’m sorry about that, Skye.”

“That’s all right,” she said. “As long as I can hold her.” She couldn’t help it—her eyes started to drift shut. “When can I go home?”

“Soon,” Dr. Wakefield said. He sounded as if he meant it. “We’ll start the process of releasing you to your next of kin.”

“That’s Jake,” she said, yawning. “Can you call him for me? I want him.”

“Of course,” Julie said in a soothing voice. “I’m sure it won’t be long—*oh!*”

At this, Skye’s eyes opened and there he was.

Jake.

He looked so, so good. But...there was something off about him, too. Somehow, he looked older than she remembered—more fine lines around his eyes, thinner in the face.

“*Skye?*” He stood there, his mouth open. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say he was in shock. “Oh, my God—are you all right?”

“*Jake!*” she cried in pure joy. “Oh, thank heavens—I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me. Where have you

been? I've missed you so much." She held up her arms, which took some effort. But he was worth it. God, she was *so* glad to see him.

He turned to the doctor. "Is she all right? I don't want to hurt her."

Julie gave Jake a warm smile. "Go on, you won't hurt her. Just be gentle."

"All right." He walked to the side of the bed and sat in the chair, staring at her as if he'd never seen her before. He took one of her hands in his. "It's good to see you."

"We'll leave you two alone," the doctor said. *Dr. Wakefield*, she mentally corrected. So she wouldn't forget. "Mr. Holt, when you're finished visiting, my research assistant Julie here or one of the nurses can give you the list of things Skye will need to transition to a home environment. She'll be ready to be released in a day or two."

"Sure," Jake said. He didn't sound quite right. Why was he acting so...oh, what was the word? So—so aloof.

Then they were alone.

"I am glad to see you," he told her, rubbing his thumb over his knuckles.

"I'm glad to see *you*. I dreamed of you all the time."

"That's...good." He swallowed nervously as he stared at where their hands were joined. "What, exactly, did you dream?"

"It—well—I don't know if I have the words. I lose words sometimes. Like *aloof*." His eyebrows jumped up as he looked

at her quizzically. “Just as an example,” she added, feeling silly. Jake wasn’t necessarily being aloof. She was pretty sure this was the first time she’d seen him, after all.

Then she realized what the problem was. “I must look awful,” she said with a grimace. “If I’d known you were going to get here today, I’d have done...something.” Point of fact, she couldn’t actually remember the last time she’d showered and there was a section of her hair that had been shaved off.

“No, no—you look fine,” Jake said. He gave her an off-kilter smile. “Feels like it’s been a long time.”

“I’m sorry,” she said as she held out her other hand to him and, after what felt like two beats too many, he took it in his. “I’ve been asleep for so long...”

“Don’t be sorry. It was an accident,” he said firmly. “The important thing now is that you’re awake. How are you? Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I haven’t seen Grace. Is she okay?”

“Yes,” Jake said. “You’ll get to see her soon. But tell me more about how you are. What did you dream?”

“Really, just a bunch of images, you know? Things we did.” She grinned at him. “Where we did them.”

“Oh.” His cheeks shot a deep red. “Those were good things. And good places.”

She leaned toward him. He did look different from how she’d seen him in her dreams. Had he always been this thin? She couldn’t be sure.

Well, that didn't matter. She was awake and he was here. Soon, they'd get Grace. That was all that counted right now. It wasn't that she wanted to spend more time in bed—there'd been enough of that—but if she remembered right, they could do just fine without a bed. “When you talk to the doctor, ask how long before I can do certain *things*, okay?” She waggled her eyebrows at him.

“Sure.” He squeezed her hands and gave her another tight smile. Then, finally, he leaned over and did what she'd been waiting for—he kissed her.

Except it was a small kiss, a mere brushing of his lips against hers. Not a passionate, soul-consuming kiss. Not the kiss she'd dreamed about.

Why not?

“I'm going to go check on Grace,” Jake said when the too-short kiss was over. “Your sister has her.”

“Yes, Lark. Because you weren't here?” She shook her head, which was not the best idea she'd ever had. Her head began to hurt. “I missed something, didn't I? You had a job in New York, right?”

“New York?” He looked at her as if she'd sprouted a second head. Or maybe a third one. Oh, what she wouldn't give for a haircut—a good one—right about now. She wanted him to look at her with the love he'd always had in his eyes. “I did have a job there.”

Oh, good—she'd gotten that part right. Suddenly, she was tired—the excitement of Jake's arrival had worn off, apparently.

She yawned and tried to hide it behind her hand, but she didn't do a very good job. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I'm just so tired of being asleep."

Finally, Jake looked at her with the tenderness she recognized. "Well, I'm here now. I'll talk to the doctor and do what I need to in order to get you set up." He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "You rest up. Grace needs you to get better."

"Okay," she agreed, having trouble keeping her eyes open. "But you'll come back for me, right?"

There was another one of those long pauses as he stared at her. "I will *always* come back for you, Skye." He squeezed her hand. "Now get some rest. I'll see you soon. I promise."

"Good," she told him as she squeezed back. Then his warmth was away from her.

Jake was here, she thought as she drifted. He was going to get Grace. And he'd come back for her.

Everything was going to be perfect.

Two

"What's wrong with her?"

Both the doctor and his research assistant looked at Jake with raised eyebrows. Okay, maybe that had been a little gruff—but seriously?

She was different. Or rather, she was the same as she'd once been—but not the same woman she'd been the last time he'd seen her. Skye hadn't looked at him with that kind of adoration in a long time. And when was the last time she'd wanted sex? When

was the last time she'd *wanted* him?

Jake had only taken one job in New York. And that had been two years ago. It'd been a small job, but it'd led to bigger and better things.

Two years ago. That'd been the last time things had been good between them. After Jake had started getting those bigger and better jobs, things had begun to fall apart.

"Skye had a traumatic brain injury," the doctor explained. "I'm her surgeon. Dr. Lucas Wakefield," he added, sticking out his hand.

Jake shook it. "But what does that mean?"

"It means that, as near as we can tell, Skye was driving into Royal when the tornado hit. We suspect her car was picked up and tossed around."

"*And?*" Jake demanded. Julie's eyebrows went up again, but Jake was past caring.

Skye had driven into a damn tornado. Why? That wasn't like her. She was more careful than that. She knew how Texas weather could be. She would have taken shelter or gotten off the road or something.

"Think of it as a concussion—only the most extreme kind. We kept her under for a few months to allow her brain to heal and it took her some time to wake up after we cut back on the drugs we were using to induce the coma. Her memory is...compromised."

"And what does *that* mean?" Jake demanded. What was it going to take to get a straight answer out of the man?

“She’s got what the layperson might call amnesia,” Dr. Wakefield explained. “She doesn’t seem to have the last two years, although her long-term memory is mostly intact. Anything that happened right before the accident is probably gone for good.”

For the second time that day, Jake had to lean on something to keep his legs underneath him. “Will she—will she get those two years back?” Would she remember how things had broken between them? Would she remember the fight? The divorce papers?

When he’d seen her just now, she hadn’t had her ring on. She hadn’t had her earrings in, either—the big diamond studs he’d bought her just as things had started to go south on them. He wondered where they were—lost in the storm or left behind on purpose?

“Hard to say. The brain is an amazing organ. For now, we recommend keeping any shocks to the system to a bare minimum. Obviously, she knows about your daughter.”

Grace. *His* daughter, Grace.

“But,” Dr. Wakefield went on as if Jake weren’t on the verge of collapse, “if there were...other surprises, I’d keep those close to the vest.”

“You want me to, what—lie to her?”

Julie said, “Not lie, no. Think of it as glossing over. She’s going to be confused for some time. Too much too soon would be a severe shock to her system. We don’t want her to have a setback.”

Jake shook his head, hoping to get the world to stop spinning. None of this was right. None of it.

Skye didn't remember how they'd broken up. Why they'd broken up.

And he couldn't tell her.

God, what a mess.

Julie handed him a packet. "She'll have to do physical therapy to regain her muscle strength. This is a preliminary list of stretches and exercises you'll need to help her with at home during her recovery to rebuild her strength to a point where PT will be helpful to her. In a week or two, you'll need to bring her into the office so she can work with a therapist."

He stared at the sheet. The top one had a photo of a woman in a spandex unitard laying on the floor and another woman in hospital scrubs stretching her leg so that it pointed straight up. "Me?"

"Are you two married?" Julie eyed him. Closely. "If so, you're her next of kin. We had planned to release her to Lark Taylor, but if you're here, you'll be the one in charge of her care."

"We are married," he said, feeling the full impact of those words. He'd sworn vows to her, vows to be there for her in sickness and in health, until death parted them. She'd wanted to break those vows, but because she'd been in a coma and he'd been in a different hemisphere, they hadn't managed to do that just yet.

Then something else dawned on him. "I suppose you're going

to tell me that I can't take her back to Houston?"

"That wouldn't be wise," Dr. Wakefield said, giving Jake a suspicious look. "I'd like to continue to monitor her recovery. I have colleagues in Houston that I could refer you to, but I'd prefer to remain her primary. Consistency of care can't be overestimated at this point."

He was going to have to take care of her. He was going to have to look at her and know he'd lost her and not tell her that. He couldn't tell her about the slow way the spark had died or how she'd had him served with papers.

Instead, he was going to have to take care of a woman who thought she still loved him because she couldn't remember how she'd stopped loving him.

And to do that, he was going to have to stay in the pit that was Royal, Texas.

How could this get any worse?

* * *

Jake had broken the cardinal rule. No matter how bad things were, never, *ever* ask how they could possibly be worse.

Because a man never knew when a dog was going to try and break through the door to get to him.

Jake stood on the front porch of a nondescript house in a nice part of town. He was pretty sure this was the address Keaton had given him. On the other side of the door, the dog was howling and scratching like a crazed beast. Jake debated getting back in the car. If the dog got out, Jake would prefer to have a layer of

metal between the two of them.

Seconds ticked by more slowly than molasses in January. His fingers started twitching toward the doorbell to ring it again. They knew he was coming, right?

The dog still going nuts, Jake was just about to start pounding on the door when he heard the lock being turned. “Nicki!” Keaton shouted. “Knock it off! Back up!”

The barking ceased almost immediately, then the door cracked open and the first thing Jake heard was the wailing of a baby. An unhappy baby.

“About time,” Keaton grumbled, opening the door and standing aside. “You woke her up. Next time, just knock. That doesn’t seem to set Nicki off nearly as badly as the doorbell does.”

“Sorry.” And truthfully—with all that screaming? Jake actually *was* sorry.

Keaton got the door closed behind him. Jake’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim lighting. The blinds were down and in addition to the screaming he heard the sounds of...classical music?

“This way,” Keaton said, stepping around Jake. “Watch out for Nicki.”

Jake eyed the dog that was now sitting next to the door. The dog’s hackles were up and it was growling, but at least it hadn’t attacked. “Nice doggie,” Jake said as he stepped around the animal. Man, he hoped that thing was well trained. “Good girl.”

“Yeah, we just got her a few weeks ago. Australian shepherd. Nicki goes with me out to the ranch—I’m training her to keep tabs on the cattle. She’s really good at it.” As Keaton spoke, he walked confidently through the house. He led Jake—and Nicki—past large framed landscapes of Texas in all the seasons—bluebells in one, the bright summer sky in another. They walked past shelves that seemed to overflow with books, all of which looked uniformly well-read. This was not the pristine, almost sterile kind of house that Skye had grown up in. This was a home that seemed lived in. But it didn’t seem particularly feminine.

“This your place?” he asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

“It’s Lark’s. We’re building a place of our own.” Keaton didn’t offer any more details.

Jake had a lot of questions from that one statement, but before he could figure out how to ask them, they entered a room that had probably once been a tidy great room. Except now there were baby blankets draped everywhere, mats with mirrored things attached spread over the floor and more stuffed animals than Jake could count. There were bookshelves in here, too, but the books had been cleared off the lower ones and bins full of toys and things that Jake didn’t recognize now filled the space. Plus, there was an absolutely huge television along one wall that seemed out of place in the worst sort of way.

In the middle of it all, on a couch that was piled high with cloths and diapers, sat Skye’s sister, Lark, with a small, squalling baby in her arms. Lark was wearing medical scrubs. Maybe she

was a nurse?

At the sight of them, Lark got a mean look about her—a look Jake recognized from days long gone. It was a look he'd seen more often on Vera Taylor's face than on Skye's, but the hatred was unmistakable.

"Babe," Keaton said, crouching down in front of her. He rubbed his hands over her thighs. "You remember Jake, my—my brother?"

"No," Lark said. But it didn't sound as if she was answering Keaton's question.

"Lark," Jake said, trying to be polite about it.

The baby cried even more. Jake wouldn't have thought that was possible, but it was. This morning, he hadn't been a father. Now he was faced with a wailing infant.

Skye wasn't supposed to have any shocks to her system. He wished someone had given the same orders for him because he wasn't sure how much more he could take.

"Where have you *been*?" Lark snapped. Her eyes filled with tears, and Jake noticed the dark circles underneath.

"Babe..." Keaton said, touching her face. It was a tender gesture.

Jake wasn't sure what part of this scene made the least amount of sense. Keaton had always said Lark Taylor was a stuck-up bookworm who thought she was better than everyone else—and Jake had never argued that point much. Lark hadn't liked Jake. The feeling had been mutual.

“I was in Bahrain. I came back for Skye and for our daughter.” The words were coming easier now. But he stared at the little baby still crying in Lark’s arms and the room began to feel smaller.

“Oh,” Lark said. “So glad to see that you’ve decided to acknowledge her. Where have you been since she was born? Do you even know how old she is? Do you know *anything* about her?”

Before Jake could reply, Keaton spoke. “Lark,” he said in a soft voice, trying to draw her attention back to him. “We talked about this.”

“But you know him, Keaton. You *know* he’s going to take Grace and disappear. Just like he always does.”

Yeah, that stung. “I promise, I’m not going to walk off with that baby.”

“Because you keep your promises, right?” Lark shot back at him. The baby was really letting loose now. “I wouldn’t trust you farther than I can throw you.”

Okay, that stung more. Jake nervously eyed the baby—his daughter—and fought the urge to cover his ears. Unfamiliar panic began to build in his chest. “I don’t know where you think I’m going to go with an infant, not when Skye’s doctor insists she needs to stay local. Despite what you assume about me and Skye, I do *not* disappear. I had a job in Bahrain, but it’s over now. I’m *going* to take care of my family.”

Keaton and Lark exchanged a look. Jake couldn’t take his eyes

off the baby. She was small and bald and an interesting shade of red—although he hoped that was from all the screaming and not her natural color. “How old is she?”

“Three months.” Lark began rocking and patting the baby on the back. She wasn’t looking at Jake, but that was okay. At least she was telling him what he needed to know. “She was eleven weeks premature—that’s their best guess. She was in the NICU for two months. And since Skye was still under when Grace was ready to leave the hospital, she was turned over to her next of kin.” She looked at Keaton. The anger she’d directed at Jake was gone from her eyes; now he saw something else there. “That’s us.”

Jake recognized the emotion. Lark looked at Keaton the way Skye used to look at him. It’d been a while, though.

He sat in a nearby recliner and dropped his head into his hands, trying to keep his emotions in check. When had Skye stopped looking at him like that? And why hadn’t he noticed when she did?

“Since she was so early,” Lark went on, “she’s got a bunch of health risks that full-term babies don’t have to worry about. She shouldn’t be outside in this weather and she shouldn’t be around strangers. If she got sick, she could wind up back in the hospital. Or worse. She’s a full-time job right now.”

Jake knew that shaking his head wasn’t going to help a damn thing but he did it anyway. He had jobs waiting now—Bahrain had been very good for him. He couldn’t take an infant with health risks out of the country. Hell, he couldn’t even take Skye

to Houston.

Trapped. He was trapped in this town.

“Keaton said he told you about the blood tests,” Lark said into the silence.

“He did.”

“He said you didn’t know about Grace.”

“I thought...” He didn’t know what to do. His entire world—everything he *thought* he knew—had been turned inside out in the space of about four hours.

He didn’t trust his brother and he didn’t trust the Taylors—with the exception of Skye.

He thought that his brother would never trust a Taylor either. Yet here Jake sat, in Lark Taylor’s house, watching her and Keaton cuddle and soothe a fussy baby. Together.

“What did you think?” For the first time since Jake had walked into this house, he heard the attitude in Keaton’s voice.

He didn’t want to tell them this. But his back was against a wall—a wall covered in four-inch spikes. As much as he hated it, he needed both Lark and Keaton right now. He had a bunch of questions and they had the closest thing to answers.

“Skye and I...” He absolutely could *not* tell them about the divorce papers. “I had that big job in Bahrain coming up. It was a yearlong contract and she decided she didn’t want to spend that much time in a foreign country. Bahrain may be richer than sin, but it’s not exactly a progressive state.”

All of that was true enough. She hadn’t wanted to go to

Bahrain and she hadn't wanted to stay home alone. She'd wanted him to stay with her. And he'd picked the job over her. That had been the proverbial straw that had broken the camel's back.

"Is that it?" Keaton said with a snort.

"Yes." And since Skye might never remember the fight, there was no one to contradict Jake's lie.

Lark looked victorious, but strangely, it didn't make her seem any happier. "Were you married? Skye said you were but she didn't have her ring on and who knows, with that memory of hers." She looked at Jake's hand.

Jake spun the plain gold band around his finger. It'd been the only ring they'd been able to afford when they slipped off into the night together four years ago.

"Yes. We got married three days after we left."

Silence followed this statement. He and Skye had driven to Houston and found a preacher who would marry them. He'd been wearing his old boots and a pair of jeans, but Skye had been in a simple white skirt and a bright blue top. She'd been so beautiful that day...

"So what are you going to do now?" Keaton finally asked. "Because Lark is right. We're not going to stand aside and let you disappear off into the night with this baby. We're not going to let you do anything that would put her at risk."

Jake gritted his teeth. He had no choice but to stay here. He looked at the baby girl. She was still crying—but at least now the decibel level wouldn't shatter glass. Jake tried to smile at the

baby, but the terror the tiny baby—his *daughter*, for crying out loud!—was sparking in his chest was making breathing difficult.

He'd never held a baby before. He didn't have the first idea how to do any of the basics—bottles and diapers and everything else. He and Skye had wanted to wait.

That wasn't true. Skye had wanted a baby from the very beginning. But Jake had looked at the reality of being a young couple barely scraping by and he'd convinced her that they needed to wait until their financial situation was more secure.

That was another thing she'd thrown back in his face during the fight, another ultimatum she'd issued. Have a baby or it's over.

He'd said after the Bahrain job. He was going to make a fortune in Bahrain. Another year, and they'd be set.

“Skye is going to be released to my care, maybe tomorrow.”

“Are you going to be able to take care of her?”

Jake would have normally taken umbrage at his brother's attitude, but right now? Yeah, it was a dangd good question.

“I don't know.”

Near silence descended upon the room. “We could keep her,” Lark finally said, looking at the baby.

“What?”

“We could keep Grace—just until Skye gets settled. Keaton and I know her schedule. We know how to take care of her. She shouldn't be out in this weather, anyway, not until she's stronger. That way, you can focus on getting Skye back into shape. You

can bring Skye over here to visit the baby, but she won't have to get up in the middle of the night.”

Could he do that? This was his daughter. A daughter he'd only known about for...five hours, but still—his flesh and blood.

He didn't want to be a monster about this. This wasn't him abandoning the baby. This was him getting Skye to the point where she could take over, right?

Plus, if he left Grace here, that would prove that he wasn't going to skip town again. “Would that be okay? I don't want to impose, but the sooner we can get Skye back to full strength, the better.”

Lark sighed as she looked at Grace. “Keaton and I already have it all worked out and, really, she's an angel.”

“I'll need to get a house of my own. The whole point of you keeping the baby here is to give Skye room to recover at her own pace.” To put it less tactfully, he didn't want to sleep under the same roof as Keaton and Lark—even if they were being really good to Grace.

“You're actually going to stay?” Keaton sounded doubtful.

Jake let the comment slide. “Skye's doctors are here and I'm not going to do a damn thing that might set her back. I know you don't believe this, but I didn't know about the tornado until this morning. Hell, I don't even know if Mom and Dad came through all right.” If he'd known...

“Mom and Dad are okay,” Keaton said in a quiet voice. “Some property damage. The ranch house is being rebuilt, but they

were in Florida and Alabama, checking out some retirement properties, so they weren't in the line of the storm. We've had them over a few times."

"Good. I'm glad." Strangely, he was. He'd spent the last four years pointedly not caring about what his family was doing. They'd wanted him to put the family above Skye. Nothing was more important to him than Skye.

"They adore Grace," Lark said in a way that made it pretty clear that this absolved most of their sins in her eyes.

"And they've come to see that Lark is nothing like her parents," Keaton went on. "I think they're realizing that not all Taylors are lying, cheating dogs."

Bitterness rose up in the back of Jake's throat. Oh, sure—now his parents were going to open their arms and welcome a Taylor into the family. But not for Jake and Skye when he had needed them to.

"What about your parents?" he asked Lark.

She dropped her eyes. "They're...okay. Fine."

"Whit Daltry's got some houses for rent in Pine Valley," Keaton said, changing the subject. "I think a couple of them are furnished—not too far from here. I'll call him."

"Thanks. That'd be great." He was not buying a house. He was not staying in Royal long. Just long enough to get Skye back on her feet and figure out where they stood.

Just then, the baby made a little hiccup-sigh noise that pulled at his heartstrings.

Lark shifted Grace off of her shoulder. Keaton picked the baby up so smoothly that Jake was jealous. “Grace, honey—this is your daddy,” Keaton said as he rubbed her on her back. Then, to Jake, he added, “You ready?”

Not really—but Jake wasn’t going to admit that to Keaton. He tried to cradle his arms in the right way. Then Keaton laid the baby out in them.

The world seemed to tilt off its axis as Jake looked down into his daughter’s eyes. They were a pale blue—just like her mother’s. Up close now, he could see that Grace had wispy hairs on her head that were so white and fine they were almost see-through.

She didn’t start bawling, which he took as a good sign. Instead, she waved her tiny hands around, so of course he had to offer her one of his fingers. When she latched on to it, he felt lost and yet *not* lost at the same time.

He was responsible for this little girl from this moment until the day he drew his last breath. The weight of it hit him so hard that, if he hadn’t already been sitting, his knees would have buckled.

This was his daughter. He and Skye had created this little person.

God, he wished she were here with him. That they could have done this together. That things between them had been different. That he’d been different.

But he couldn’t change the past, not when his present—and

his future—was gripping his little finger with surprising strength.

“Hi, Grace,” he whispered. He shook his hand a little, raising her fist with his pinkie finger. “It’s so good to meet you.”

The baby smiled, which made Jake feel ten feet tall. “Hey, she’s smiling at—”

Then a horrible noise—and an even more horrible smell—cut him off.

Keaton began to laugh. The dog whined and put its paws over its nose.

“Sorry,” Lark said, rising quickly. “She’s about due for another bottle, too.”

“Time for your first lesson—diapers,” Keaton said as he clapped Jake on the back. “Welcome to fatherhood.”

Three

“Grace is with Lark, right?” Skye asked. She knew Jake had answered that question at least three times already, but she wanted to see her daughter.

“Are you asking because you don’t remember the answer or because you don’t trust me?” Jake grinned at her from the driver’s seat. It was an easy grin that warmed her from the inside out—but there was something underneath it that had an edge.

She was going home. With Jake. The past few days had been the longest of her waking life. Skye had been ready and willing to leave that hospital far behind and get back to making new memories with Jake.

“I just...I just want to see her again. I remember you already

said yes,” she hurried to add. “I feel like I’ve missed so much.” She laughed. “Probably because I have.”

The process of being released from the hospital had taken most of the day. Late winter twilight settled over the landscape as Jake drove toward their new home. “And...we’re not going back to our apartment, right?”

“That’s right,” he said gently. “The doctor wants you to stay close to the hospital. I rented a house. It’s close to Lark and the baby and not too far from the hospital.”

“I wish I remembered Grace,” she said, an impotent frustration bubbling up. “Why is Lark keeping her?”

“Because Lark is a nurse and you need to recover,” he answered smoothly. “We’ll go over and visit, I promise. And I always keep my promises, don’t I?”

“Yes...” She tried to make sense of that hidden edge to his words. It was almost as if he was mad at her. But did that make any sense?

No, it didn’t. He was probably just upset that she’d been hurt so badly. Jake had never been the best at expressing his feelings. She knew there were holes in her memory and she didn’t know if those holes would ever get filled.

But she was still here and she was getting better. She’d just have to make some new memories with Jake. And with Grace.

She looked around and was surprised to see that she recognized the road they were on. “Stop!” she cried, feeling hopeful. Now was as good a time as any to start making some

of those new memories.

“What?” Jake asked in alarm as he slammed on the brakes. His right arm flew across her chest to keep her from lurching forward.

“We used to park here, remember?” She undid her seat belt and slid over to him. “We used to stop here on the way home.”

She grinned nervously at him. Yes, she wanted to get home, but she’d been in a bed—by herself—for the last four months. Four months without Jake. It was time to fix that starting right *now*.

Jake did not bend much in her arms. She ran her fingers through his hair and pulled him down to her. “We did stop here, didn’t we? I didn’t get that wrong, did I?”

“We did,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Are you going to kiss me, Jake Holt?” she whispered against his lips.

He turned his head. “The doctor said—he said we shouldn’t stress you out too much. Physically.”

Skye sighed in disappointment. “Not even if I want to be stressed? Just a little? Not even a kiss?”

Jake didn’t reply for a moment. Then he sort of chuckled and said, “When we used to stop here, I don’t remember it ever being *just* a kiss.”

Skye leaned into him, feeling his warmth. The hospital had been cold. But Jake had always run hot. She’d loved curling up against him in the middle of winter, letting his body warm hers

until things started to get downright steamy.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she told him. It felt like an important thing to say. She was pretty sure she’d said it before, but she wanted to say it again.

He didn’t respond. Not the way she’d hoped. Instead, he said, “Sorry, traffic. Can you buckle up? I don’t want another car accident. I just got you out of that hospital.” He said it in a jokey kind of way, as if she was supposed to laugh along with him. But she didn’t.

“All right. But later I’m going to kiss you. I don’t care what the doctors said.”

“Later,” he agreed. He waited until she was buckled up and then he drove on.

“How long will we be in Royal?” she asked. “I know how much you hate it here. I wish you didn’t have to stay just because of me.”

He tensed. “Aren’t you glad to be back home?”

“I guess...” He shot her a worried look. “What?”

“I thought you’d be glad to be here, that’s all. You’d talked about coming home—remember?”

“Oh, I know. I wish our families would see the light of day and put the feud to rest.” She sighed. She was missing something again. It was as if there were a fog over her mind that was so thick that it hid things from her. But when she tried to grab it or push it aside, it slipped through her fingers. It was both there and *not* there. Just like her memory, apparently. “But I’d rather be

with you than deal with my parents. Have you seen them? I don't think I have. I've seen Lark. And I want to say that... Didn't Lark come in and talk to me? While I was sick? She's with Keaton now, right?"

"Yeah, that's right." He gave her a tight smile.

"Good. I'm glad. I knew the Taylors and the Holts could get along if they just...just...oh, shoot. I lost another word."

"It's okay," Jake said quickly. "I understand what you mean. Hey—here we are."

Jake turned past a big sign that announced they were in Pine Valley. They drove past spacious homes set far back from the road.

"Is this where we're going to stay? This is nice," Skye said, glancing out the window.

"I wanted to get the best for you," he told her. "This is a furnished house, but if there's something you want from the apartment back in Houston..." His voice trailed off. "Or I can buy you new things, too. Money is no object."

"Since when?" she demanded. "I mean, we were just getting comfortable. I don't think we should drain the bank accounts dry."

"Oh. Um, well—hmm. The last job," he said, stumbling over the words. "I, uh, I did a great job and I got a huge bonus."

"You did? Oh, Jake—that's wonderful!" But then confusion set in again. "Is that why you weren't with me? In the accident? Because of the job?"

“Yeah. This is it.” He pulled into a long drive. “This house has a small gym in it. That’s why I picked it. That way you can use a couple of machines to help you regain your strength.”

“Oh, good thinking.” Because the one thing she did not have right now was a lot of strength. She hated feeling weak, but she wouldn’t be that way for long.

Jake parked and Skye undid her belt again. She got the door open as he went around the front of the car, but when she slid out of the seat, her legs almost didn’t hold. “Whoa,” she gasped, clinging to the door for support. She’d gotten out of the bed on her own, but the rest of the trip had been in a wheelchair. She hadn’t realized how weak she actually was.

“Easy, now,” Jake said. “I’ve got you.”

The next thing she knew, he swept Skye up into his strong arms as if she weighed nothing at all.

She giggled as he carried her up the steps to the front door. “It’s like we’re married,” she said, resting her head against his shoulder.

“Yeah,” he said. He sounded unconvincing. “Just like that. I carried you over the threshold of that hotel the night we got married, didn’t I?”

“Mmm.” Without loosening her grip, she twirled one finger through the short hairs on the back of his neck. “That was a good night, wasn’t it? You were so handsome.”

Jake set her down long enough to get the door open. Then, after the barest moment of hesitation, he picked her up again.

“And you were beautiful,” he said, sounding very serious about it. “You still are.”

She laughed again. God, she’d missed this man. “I really need a shower before I’m going to start buying that line from you.” Which was not a half-bad idea. “Or a bath? What does this place have? I think I’d need a bench in a shower.”

“Your choice. There’s a whirlpool tub that’ll be good for soaking and a separate shower. I think it has a bench in it.” He carried her over the threshold. “Welcome home, Skye.”

“Oh, wow.” Dusky light streamed in from floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating a massive, well-appointed great room with leather furnishings and a comfortable-looking couch. Along one wall was a stone hearth. Skye craned her neck and saw that the great room opened onto a kitchen. She couldn’t see much of it, but she caught glimpses of gleaming stainless steel and granite countertops. “Jake, this place is gorgeous! Are you sure we can afford it?”

“It was a big bonus,” he told her. He carried her over to the comfortable couch and gently set her down. He tried to stand, but she wasn’t going to let him go.

She held tight and pulled him down. He didn’t fall into her the way he normally did, but he didn’t pull away. “I missed you. This,” she told him as she brushed her lips against his. “Feels like it’s been forever.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. He pressed his lips to hers and sighed. Skye knew that noise. He always did that when he was ready and

willing to take things to the next level. The first time he'd sighed against her mouth like that, she'd pulled away and demanded to know what was wrong, what she'd messed up. And instead of telling her she wasn't a good kisser, he'd only pulled her in closer and kissed her hard.

So she opened her mouth and traced her tongue over his lips and waited for him to take the next step.

He didn't.

He stood up and damn it all, she wasn't strong enough to hold on to him. "Um, yeah. Don't want to overdo it on your first night home."

She frowned at him. "You won't break me, you know."

"I know, I know. Hey, are you hungry? I could order some food. I drove past the Tower Pizza—it's still standing. I'll get you a green pepper and mushroom."

"Oh. Okay." Something still felt...off. She groped around in her mind, trying to get the fog that had covered everything to shift or just go the heck away, but it didn't. "But you don't like mushrooms. You don't have to eat them just for my sake."

He paused halfway to the kitchen. "I'll get two pizzas. I know you don't like pepperoni. Then we can have some for lunch tomorrow. Sound good?"

She snickered at him. "Two pizzas? That must have been some bonus."

A shadow crossed over his face. But he said, "It was. I'll be right back. Then we'll see about getting you into the shower."

Skye liked the sound of that. She looked down at her loose-fitting yoga pants and unisex T-shirt emblazoned with the hospital's logo on it. This was not a good look—in fact, she probably resembled an escaped mental patient more than anything else.

She just wanted to put this whole brain-injury thing behind them and get back to their lives. And Grace—she needed to get Grace, although the concept of a small human that was her daughter wasn't something she had a firm grasp on just yet. Grace Holt was still...an abstract idea.

They'd get to Grace. Lark had the baby so Skye felt okay just focusing on Jake right now.

It really did feel like longer than a few months since she'd been with him. But her dreams had been wild and varied and had always had a glimmer of something that might have been a memory at the core of them—like parking at that spot and making out.

That settled it. Shower first, real clothing second, seducing Jake third.

She was going to remember this.

* * *

Jake stood in the kitchen, forcing himself to breathe evenly.

Jesus, she was going to kill him. He was halfway amazed he wasn't already dead yet.

What the hell was going on? That doctor hadn't been lying when he'd said that Skye had lost the past two years. It was as if

the whole seven hundred and thirty days hadn't happened. The Skye that was sitting out there on that couch was the Skye he'd run away with—bold and forward and unable to keep her hands off of him. She was the Skye he'd been unable to stay away from, come hell or high water.

Gone was the quiet, distant woman who didn't care how much he hated this town, didn't want to share a pizza with him—didn't want *him*. The Skye on the couch had no clue that other Skye had taken over the past two years of her life.

She didn't remember falling out of love with him.

She still thought she loved him.

And she seemed hell-bound to prove it.

What was he supposed to do here? The jerk move would be to just start sleeping with her. But the doctor seemed to think she'd start to recover some of her memories and once she did—once she remembered the divorce papers he'd shoved into his glove box—she'd accuse him of taking advantage of her while she was confused.

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