

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

A heartwarming scene of a family in a rural setting at sunset. A man in a plaid shirt and jeans holds a young girl in a pink dress. A woman in a white floral dress stands next to him, looking at the child. They are in a field of wildflowers with a wooden fence and a white barn in the background.

The Texas
Rancher's New
Family
Allie Pleiter

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«HarperCollins»

Pleiter A.

The Texas Rancher's New Family / A. Pleiter — «HarperCollins»,

A Match Made in Texas Tess Buckton returns to the Blue Thorn Ranch from Australia, badly needing Texas comfort. But the Outback follows her home when celebrity Aussie horse-trainer Cooper Pine rents the ranch next door. The other Buckton siblings are worried Cooper's high-profile will upset the idyllic Martins Gap community—but Tess isn't so sure. Cooper is surprisingly down-to-earth and a doting father to his special needs daughter. But getting close enough to learn his secrets could mean exposing hers, and Tess isn't ready for that—even if Cooper and his matchmaking daughter are just what her heart is yearning for. Blue Thorn Ranch: New Beginnings, Texas style

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"You said it was somebody's birthday. So I brought over some Buckton brownies."

Cooper looked genuinely surprised. From behind him came the smiling face of a young girl. Then came an odd clicking sound as crutches came into view, flanking the ruffles of a frilly party dress. Tess told herself not to stare as the ruffled skirt ended in only one white cowboy boot.

"Sophie, this is the lady who told me about Lolly's blondies," Cooper said.

Sophie's eyes grew wide. "They were super yummy!"

Tess felt herself smile. "Another of my favorites is my grandmother's brownies, and she insisted I bring some over to the birthday girl."

"I'm six now," pronounced Sophie. She shifted to show off her solitary boot. "Do you like 'em? They're my birthday present."

There was something brave and bittersweet in how the child referred to her single boot as a pair. "Mighty nice," Tess said. "White boots are extra special—you must be extra special yourself."

She'd called a little boy in Adelaide "extra special"—a little boy she'd never get to buy birthday presents for now—and the words sat bittersweet on her tongue.

ALLIE PLEITER, an award-winning author and RITA® Award finalist, writes both fiction and nonfiction. Her passion for knitting shows up in many of her books and all over her life. Entirely too fond of French macarons and lemon meringue pie, Allie spends her days writing books and avoiding housework. Allie grew up in Connecticut, holds a BS in speech from Northwestern University and lives near Chicago, Illinois.

The Texas Rancher's New Family

Allie Pleiter



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But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that

Christ's power may rest on me.

—2 Corinthians 12:9

To Linda

Because she's stronger than she knows

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[Chapter One](#)

“Just one—no, two.” Tess Buckton ogled the covered dish of Lolly’s Diner’s decadent blondies, fighting the urge to buy all of them. After flying halfway around the world in the last thirty hours, she could easily eat the whole plate without stopping. Not that she would, but she could. “Okay, three. But no more.”

“They that good?”

Tess’s jet-lagged brain struggled to distinguish the Texas surroundings she stood in now from the Australian settings she’d left behind. It took a few seconds to recognize that the Aussie accent she’d grown so used to hearing didn’t belong in her hometown of Martins Gap, Texas. She turned to see a tall, tanned cowboy, one eyebrow raised in question as a smirk turned up one corner of his mouth.

“Yeah,” she said, “they are. I just got back into town and I’ve been dreaming of these since I got on the plane thirty hours ago. I’ve been in Adelaide, actually.”

His eyes widened at the mention of the Australian city. “From near Alice Springs, up in Northern Territory, myself. Not that you could tell from the accent, I’m sure.” His smirk spread into a full-blown and rather disarming smile.

Her brother Luke had mentioned this guy in an email. There had been talk of the well-known Australian horse trainer looking at the property abutting her family’s ranch. According to Luke, some said he was renting it for the season, others speculated he was planning to buy the land at the end of the summer. “I’m guessing your last name is Pine,” she offered.

The man put one hand on his chest. “Guilty as charged.”

One of the famous Pine brothers. Only, which one? She looked at him, trying to draw the face of either of the TV celebrity siblings up from her sleep-deprived memory. It wasn’t like she’d ever really followed the show, but it was famous enough that ads for it were pretty much impossible to avoid.

“I’m the other one,” he said, tipping up his hat.

She laughed as she accepted the bag of three blondies from Lolly and immediately reached into the bag for one.

“That would make me Cooper,” he explained. She nodded as she bit into the confection, glad not to have to admit she could only remember Hunter Pine’s name in her present state. He cocked his head toward the other four blondies still remaining on the covered plate. “There’s a little lady at my house with a birthday tomorrow. Should I buy the rest?”

Luke hadn’t mentioned that the man had a wife in his last email. Only that the rumors had been true and one of the famous Pine brothers had indeed showed up and moved into the vacant ranch house—but for how long? Her brother was wondering about the answer to that question, and so was she. A tiny town like Martins Gap wasn’t really the kind of place she expected someone of Pine’s notoriety to put down roots.

“Yes,” she answered him, “I’d stick a candle in any one of these.” Tess sent an appreciative smile Lolly’s way. Lolly’s blondies were the ultimate comfort food for her, and she could use a whopping dose of comfort these days. “They’re as good as I remember.”

“Of course they are, Tess, honey,” Lolly replied.

“Tess? Tess Buckton?”

“That’s me.” Gran would scold her for forgetting to introduce herself, but Gran hadn’t been up for thirty hours and multiple time zones.

“We’re neighbors,” Cooper said as he pointed to the remaining blondies and then held up four fingers to Lolly. “I’m renting the Larkey place for the season. Beaut land.”

“Wish I could say as much for the previous owner,” Tess replied the moment her mouth wasn’t full of gooey white chocolate and caramel. The cowboy’s charming but clearly amused smile made her wonder just how much powdered sugar was all over her blondie-craving face. Tess wiped the last of the powdered sugar off her fingers against her jeans and shook Cooper’s huge tanned hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I keep hearing things that tell me this Larkey bloke wasn’t pleased to meet anyone. But I hear good things about Bucktons. I should have known you were part of the clan. The eyes and all.”

Most Martins Gap residents knew the Buckton family for the bright turquoise color of their eyes, but she didn’t really expect the reputation to extend to seasonal renters of foreclosed properties. “So you’re here for the summer?”

“Yeah. Layin’ low a bit.”

Tess looked at the delicious square in her hand and debated whether downing an entire blondie in front of a complete stranger would constitute the best first impression.

Her expression must have been a dead giveaway, for Cooper nodded toward the blondie and said, “Go ’head. Don’t lemme stop ya.”

She did. She wanted to eat all three in rapid succession, even knowing that would make her nearly ill by the end of it. Lolly’s blondies. She’d been craving them every day since she’d booked her flight. Now she could eat them every day for as long as she was here—which might be a while. She took another bite as Lolly handed her the change from her purchase. As the woman lifted the lid on the cake plate to remove the remaining four, Cooper snatched one and took a healthy bite.

“Oh,” he said from behind a mouthful. “I see your point. These will definitely make her day.”

Lolly beamed but she didn’t exactly look surprised. And why should she? Tess couldn’t recall a single person who didn’t love Lolly’s blondies. If Martins Gap had an official dessert, this was it. Even Gran—who was famous for her own brownies—admitted that Lolly topped her efforts.

“So, you’re just staying for the summer?” Tess asked as she put her wallet back in her handbag. She wasn’t usually the type to fish for gossip but his comment had practically handed the opening to her. And she had to admit, she was curious.

Cooper smiled, pointing to his mouth now full of a second massive bite of blondie. Tess waited for him to finish but, even though he’d talked right through his last bite, he never offered an answer, just a dramatic “Mmm-mmm” as he paid Lolly. As if he’d never heard her question.

He finished the transaction, tipped his hat with a dashing wink at both Lolly and Tess, and headed out the door...

And practically headlong into Luke, who had gone to visit his fiancée's physical therapy practice in town while Tess got her blondie fix. The frost between the two men could be felt even from this distance. No words passed between them as Cooper walked away.

"You ready to head to the ranch?" Luke asked, still staring at the doorway Cooper had exited. "Gran'll be waiting."

Gran. Tess swallowed the conflicting feelings that rose around the prospect of seeing her grandmother again. So much in her life had changed in the sixteen months since her last visit and she was crawling home in a defeat no one yet knew had come. On the one hand, Tess yearned to spend time with the wise, tenderhearted woman who had raised her after her mother's death. Next to Luke, Tess had felt closest to Gran when their mother's death had turned her eleven-year-old world upside down.

It was Gran and Luke who had been her anchors in the nine years her father had lived after that, nine years her father hadn't made pleasant for any of the four Buckton children. Dad was the reason all of them had left the ranch and Gran was the reason each of her siblings had returned, one by one, in the past few years.

But Gran could always read her almost as well as Luke could. Which meant one of them was bound to figure out what had happened and why she was back. She could hope to keep the events of recent months from one of them for at least a little while, but both of them? She didn't stand a chance.

You knew that when you chose to come home, she told herself. Not that there had been all that much choice to it. What was the saying? Something about how home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. And she'd had nowhere else to turn.

"Tess?" Luke peered at her, thrusting his face into her vision, snapping her thoughts away from halfway around the world to another time and place. "You hungry or something? I mean, hungrier for more than blondies?" After a second, when she didn't answer, he added, "You okay?"

"I've been up for thirty hours, that's all. I didn't conk out on the plane like I usually do." As well traveled as she was for her job as a freelance photographer, Tess usually made excellent use of red-eye flights. Only these days Tess didn't sleep well no matter where she lay her head—and that had nothing to do with jumping the international date line.

"All the more reason to get you home so Gran can fuss over you. Catch you later, Lolly." Luke gave a wink—as much of a showman's wink as the one Cooper Pine had given—to the woman behind the counter and plucked the bag from Tess's hands as they headed for the door. "You got one for me, didn't you?"

"Would it matter if I didn't?"

He pulled open the bag. "Only two cleaned Lolly out?"

"No, I got three, but Cooper Pine cleaned her out of the other four."

"Cooper Pine," Luke muttered behind a mouthful of blondie. Her brother spoke the name with a distinct lack of Texan hospitality. Which was amusing, because from what she'd heard of the Pine brothers, Cooper and Luke had loads of attention-grabbing showmanship in common. "I hoped he was only vacationing, but I told you rumor has it he's thinking about buying the place."

"I tried to ask him about that, but he didn't answer. Deliberately dodged the question, I'd say."

Luke grunted. "Why'd the bank rent to him anyway? Don't foreclosures usually sit empty? The last thing we need is to look down our drive and see a line of Pineys camped out in front of his gate."

Fans of the horse training program known as the Pine Method—"Pineys," they liked to call themselves—existed in Australia and Texas, and probably every other city the brothers visited on their popular, televised training tours. Their methods often achieved amazing results, but that was only half the reason for their celebrity. The way Tess saw it, the brothers' stunning good looks, their

dynamic personalities and the sheer relentlessness of their marketing had done the rest. Pineys were mostly female and it wasn't hard to see why.

Having grown up on a ranch, Tess had as much appreciation of an attractive man who looked at home on horseback as the next girl. But that didn't mean she was ready to get caught up in the hype. Tess didn't own a horse, and even if she did, she wasn't sure she would count herself among the Piney ranks. Their expensive videos, weekly television series, multiple books and vast selection of Pine Method merchandising struck her as a bit over the top.

"Did you tell him you'd just come from Australia?" Luke asked, driving with one hand while he polished off the blondie with the other.

"I did."

"Did he go all 'G'day' and 'Down Under' on you, dialing up that fake charm? Honestly, he acts like he thinks we've never seen an Aussie before."

Luke was a fine one to talk about being an overbearing flirt. Before the rodeo accident that ended his bull-riding career, Tess would have clocked Luke in as possessing more ego than both Pine brothers combined. "I think he's married. Did you know that?"

That seemed to surprise her brother. "I didn't. Wouldn't surprise me, though—the ladies seem to go for him, and he must pull in a pretty paycheck. I haven't seen her. Now that I think of it, I barely see him."

"And yet you're sure he goes all Aussie on everyone." This was a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Or at least, it would have been before—for the old Luke. She was rather impressed with the person her twin brother was becoming lately. Luke—formerly a confirmed and rowdy bachelor who couldn't imagine any life outside of the razzle-dazzle of the rodeo circuit—had settled comfortably back in their hometown and was getting married to his high school sweetheart. This was not only good news, but offered Tess a convenient excuse to come home from halfway around the world.

"Have you ever met an Aussie before Cooper Pine?"

Luke grunted. "Course I have. A few were on the bull riders tour. Dated a few sheilas, too."

Tess knew enough Aussie slang to find the term for females ridiculous in Luke's Texan drawl. "More than a few, I imagine. All of that being over now, of course."

"Of course."

"Because Ruby knows how to make you pay if you get too friendly with any of those Pineys who might be lining up near home."

"Ugh, what an awful thought. Not Ruby—but a bunch of screaming fan girls scaring the herd. No one wants him and his crazy brother to put up a Buy Your Show Tickets Here billboard." Luke pulled onto the road that led up toward the Blue Thorn Ranch. The familiar scenery began the slow, peaceful seep into Tess's soul. The house with its sprawling front porch. The barn. The green of the pastures with the ever-growing herd of bison silhouetted against the blue of the sky. Home. For now or for good? I'm still too hurt to know that yet.

"Still, anyone's got to be an improvement over Larkey, right?" The ranch's former owner had caused serious trouble for their oldest brother, Gunner Jr., as the Bucktons had fought to keep the Blue Thorn Ranch from the clutches of a shady land developer awhile back.

"You'd think," Luke replied. "Can't say as I'm sure yet. For a brother act like the Pines, we've only seen Cooper. Hunter hasn't shown up yet—so I'm taking that as a good sign." Hunter was the dominant brother of the pair, if the advertising was to be believed.

Of course, the advertising also made both brothers look very single and available. They presented themselves as rugged bachelors, which made the information about Cooper's "little lady" a surprise. Was the omission privacy or just careful marketing?

"He seems nice enough."

Luke glared. "You been here, what—all of an hour? And you've decided our closemouthed new neighbor is 'nice enough'?"

Tess put the snarky remark down to soon-to-be-groom stress and hauled herself out of the pickup to take in the glorious sunshine that only the Blue Thorn Ranch could offer. For better or worse, she was home.

* * *

Cooper placed the bakery bag down on the kitchen counter. “Glenno,” he called to the longtime employee who had managed his house no matter where he lived, “what time is it in Alice Springs?”

“Seven tomorrow morning,” came Glenno’s voice from inside the pantry. The kitchen of this place was large but outdated. Cooper made a mental note to himself that he was going to have to push out the back wall to make a dining room big enough for his plans.

Plans he’d have to reveal sooner or later. He could do it now, while his brother Hunter was back home taping a special Outback segment before their next set of Pine Method tour dates. Sure, it’d be the coward’s way out to tell Hunter his plans while the man was halfway around the world, but he’d chickened out all the other times Hunter had been close by. He knew he needed to get it over with...but Sophie’s birthday was tomorrow and he had no desire to spoil the celebration by igniting that particular bomb today. Or was he just making excuses for himself again?

“Hunter’s up,” Glenno said as he came out of the pantry with a bag of onions, “if that’s what you’re thinking.” The man had always been so much more than just a cook or house manager—he was a wise part of the family. He was also the only other person who knew Cooper’s plan. For the hundredth time since renting the ranch, Cooper wondered how long it should stay that way.

“He called half an hour ago,” Glenno added. He smiled as if that were a trivial detail, as if the strain between Hunter and Cooper was simply a ripple on a much larger pond. For a man continually dragged around the world in the wake of his famous employer, Glenno was the happiest man Cooper knew. “At home in his own skin everywhere,” Hunter used to say.

The call wasn’t a trivial detail, because his brother was never known to be an early riser. The early hour either meant Hunter was losing his famous immunity to jet lag, or he was itching to share some new business plan for the Pine Brothers’ franchise. Given Hunter’s nonstop drive, it wasn’t hard to guess which.

Cooper shared neither his brother’s drive, nor his travel immunity. He’d skipped this latest jaunt back Down Under on the half-truthful premise of wanting a between-season break, but it was really more than that. He needed time to think about how to dismount the constant media carousel that had been his life for the past few years.

How do you tell your brother you still want to be brothers but not part of the Pine Brothers?

You don’t. Or, at least, you drag your feet on doing so. Heaps. “Why didn’t Hunter call my cell?”

“He did,” Glenno answered wearily. “Only, since it was sitting on your desk, it wasn’t much help.”

Despite owing much of his success to the technology that allowed the media to promote him around the clock, Cooper hated cell phones. If he had his way, he’d never carry one. He hated how the thing took up all the space in his pocket and assumed he’d pay it nonstop attention. There was a time a man could be alone with his thoughts in the world, not feel compelled to type them continuously into cyberspace with itty-bitty keys or even just pictures of keys.

Hunter, of course, owned a smartphone, two tablets and one of those new watch gizmos to boot. The man had been known to post videos of his lunch to social media. Even if Hunter was in the remotest quarter of the Outback, he was never off the grid and never off the stage.

Cooper ignored Glenno’s long-suffering look, pointing instead to the white paper bag. “A new recipe for you to figure out. But save one for Sophie to have tomorrow—those things are delicious.” Glenno, aside from being a great cook, was also somewhat of a gastronomic sleuth, forever attempting to recreate sauces, dishes and foods he found in restaurants or shops. If Glenno’s track record could be trusted, Cooper and Sophie could have an unending supply of Lolly-like blondies whenever they wanted them by the end of the week, if not for tomorrow’s birthday.

Then, casually, Cooper added, "I met another of our neighbors today."

Glenno began inspecting one of the blondies with a scientific squint. "More Bucktons?"

"Yes. At least this one's pretty."

Glenno smirked. "So not Luke or Gunner." He broke off a corner of the treat and tasted it. After a moment's savoring, he gave an approving nod. "Very good. Who'd you meet?"

"Tess. I'd heard Luke had a twin, but I always assumed it was another bloke. This sister just blew into town—from Adelaide, believe it or not. Why didn't anyone tell me one of the Bucktons was there lately?"

Glenno broke off another piece. "Because they don't talk to you. Because you don't talk to them. Because they're afraid this ranch is about to become another stop on the tour and you don't tell them otherwise." He set the confection down. "You can't start if you don't start."

Another Glenno-ism. The man had an unending collection of wise sayings that didn't quite make sense. Hunter called him the Aussie Yogi Berra—something Glenno took as a compliment. "I just have to find a way to tell Hunter first. Word might spread, and I don't want him to hear it from anyone but me."

Glenno took a piece of the blondie, sniffed it then squished it between his fingers, testing the texture. "You keep waiting for the perfect time to tell your brother unwelcome news. The longer you wait, the worse the news gets."

"Not if I tell him the right way." But Cooper knew his voice lacked conviction. They'd had this conversation a dozen times already.

Glenno shook his head. "Even if you tell him the perfect way." He looked at Cooper. "You want to do this thing, dontcha?"

From the moment his plan arrived in his head, seemingly straight from God Himself, Cooper had never wanted to do anything more than the plan he was waiting to launch right now. "Of course."

"And you know Hunter won't approve."

"I think that's pretty much certain, don't you?"

Glenno nodded once. "Two facts that won't change no matter how much time you let them sit. But the sooner you tell him, the sooner you two can start working past this. He is your brother, mate. Give him some credit for wanting you to be happy—once he has a chance to get used to the idea."

Cooper poured himself a cup of coffee. "Credit? Remember what's going on here. I'm breaking up the act. Hunter's going to take that like a stab in the heart. He won't just say 'goodonya' and move on like it's just a minor ding. I'm denting—maybe even sinking—the Pine Brothers' brand. The unforgivable sin. I doubt he'll ever speak to me again after I tell him."

"And yet you keep saying you're tired of Hunter deciding your future."

"Daddy! You're back!" Cooper heard the welcome sound of his very nearly six-year-old daughter coming down the hallway toward the kitchen. "I need your help." He turned to see Sophie's face scrunched up beneath two wild peaks of strawberry-blond curls. "I can't do it. You hafta." She leaned her crutches up against the kitchen counter and slid onto the seat next to him, catching sight of the white bag as she did. "What's in there?"

Break out early birthday blondies? Or make another sad attempt at Daddy pigtails? It wasn't a hard decision. "Special six-year-old birthday goodies that were supposed to be for tomorrow. But they can arrive a day early for anyone having pigtail troubles."

She grinned up at her father. "That's me."

"They're called blondies, and a lady in town said they were her absolute favorite. I knew right then I needed some for my little lady on her birthday." Glenno produced a plate, and Cooper slid one of the goodies onto it and in front of Sophie. "I've barely mastered the ponytail, sunshine, and now you want two?"

"And braids."

Cooper laughed. "I'm pretty sure braids are beyond me."

“Oh, Daddy,” Sophie said after a hearty “Mmm” to go with her first bite of the confection, “nothin’s too hard for you. Not even French braids.”

Cooper looked at Glenno. “What’s a French braid?”

Glenno smirked. “Harder than a regular braid, I expect.”

Sophie unleashed her hair from the uneven tangles and placed the glittery holders on the counter in front of Cooper. “I want to wear pigtails on my birthday tomorrow. Can’t you try? Please?”

Cooper had watched his fair share of how-to videos just to master the ponytail—an irony not lost on a horse trainer. Still, all those curls atop a wiggly five-year-old, combined with the challenge of maneuvering those impossibly tiny elastics, made two pigtails feel nearly impossible. Still, this was Sophie. How could he say no?

“I’ll look it up tonight and we’ll give it a whirl tomorrow.” He thought about Tess Buckton, the pretty neighbor he’d just met. She had long hair. Maybe he could override his “keep to yourself” rule in the name of birthday hair.

Then he remembered Luke Buckton’s none-too-neighborly glare as he’d left the bakery.

Maybe not.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Tess pulled a Blue Thorn Ranch truck up to the main house after being buzzed in at the Larkey ranch. She’d have to stop calling it that if Cooper stayed. It had been the Larkey ranch—often said with a derisive sneer for the wily, backstabbing former owner—for her whole life. Well, lots of things were changing around here. The loss of Larkey as a neighbor could only fall into the positive column as far as she was concerned.

She adjusted the basket on her arm and rang the doorbell on the big, beautiful old home. A startling squeal—a distinctly little-girl sound—came from inside the house. Could it be that Cooper Pine’s little lady really was little? The thought surprised her as Cooper’s face peered through the door’s small upper window before he pulled the door open. “Well, hello there.”

“You said it was somebody’s birthday. Blondies—even Lolly’s—aren’t enough for a birthday in my book. So I brought over some Buckton brownies.” She held out the basket. “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Well,” Cooper said, looking genuinely surprised, “look here. Buckton birthday brownies.”

From behind him came the smiling face of a young girl—eyes as green as her father’s, but with a wild tousle of strawberry-blond curls rather than Cooper’s darker hair. Definitely Cooper Pine’s daughter. Was she the birthday girl? Or was it her mother, whom Tess thought was probably back somewhere in the house—maybe in the kitchen, munching down a blondie?

Then came an odd clicking sound as a pair of Canadian crutches came into view, flanking the ruffles of a frilly party dress. Tess told herself not to stare as the ruffled skirt ended in only one white cowboy boot.

Cooper was clearly accustomed to smoothing over such moments for his daughter. “Sophie, this is the lady who told me about Lolly’s blondies.”

Sophie’s eyes grew wide. “They were super yummy!”

Tess felt a smile spread easily to her face. “I know. They’re among my favorites. But another of my favorites is my grandmother’s brownies, and she insisted I bring some over when she learned there was a birthday girl in the house today.”

“I’m six now,” pronounced Sophie with regal emphasis. So the birthday was hers. “That means I go to first grade in the fall.” She shifted on the crutches to show off her solitary boot. “Do you like ’em? They’re my birthday present.”

There was something brave and bittersweet in how the child referred to her single boot as a pair. Tess liked her immediately, feeling guilty for her momentary stumble. “Mighty nice,” she said. “I’ve always felt white boots were extra special. Never had white ones myself—you must be extra special.”

She'd called a little boy in Adelaide "extra special"—a little boy she'd never get to buy birthday presents for now—and the words sat bittersweet on her tongue.

Sophie, oblivious to Tess's memories, somehow executed a twirl on the crutches. It flounced her ruffled skirt out in girly splendor. "Thanks. Daddy says so all the time."

Still no mention of a "Mommy." And this "Daddy" was not the Cooper Pine of the Pine Method empire or the man with the gleaming toothy smile from the television show. His off-camera persona was quieter, calmer, less imposing, but still in full possession of the charisma she imagined made him a star. And probably won him the heart of some strawberry-blond who had given him this beautiful daughter. So where was the mother? The noise and chatter at their doorstep would have sent most women Tess knew out to see what was going on.

"Good for Dad," she said. "I don't mean to interrupt if you've got a party planned."

"Can you braid?" the little girl asked.

"Huh?"

Sophie tugged on her curls. "Braid. Hair."

Cooper shrugged. "I'm kind of out of my league here, and someone wants birthday braids."

But wouldn't her mother...? Oh, Tess thought with a momentary shock of understanding, remembering being a little girl herself with no mother to fix her hair anymore. Apparently this precious child was Cooper's one and only little lady, after all.

Tess stared down at those sweet eyes. "Birthday brownies and braids, that's me."

"Well, then," said Cooper as he gestured her inside, "come on in. As a matter of fact, your timing is downright great. Glenno will want to know if we got the blondies right, and you're just the taste-tester we need."

"You're right!" Sophie cheered, suddenly taking off down the hallway in a tumbling three-legged canter that Tess had to admire. "Glenno! Glenno!" Her cries echoed as she disappeared to another part of the house.

"Our cook, among other things," Cooper explained as he relieved Tess of the basket. "I call Glenno our culinary lyrebird. Likes to figure out other people's recipes and imitate them. I gave him one of the blondies yesterday." He looked down at the basket. "Um...these aren't a secret family recipe, are they?"

Tess felt a little knot pull at her stomach. "As a matter of fact..."

Cooper pulled open a door on a hallway credenza and slipped the basket in. "I'll hide 'em for now. Later, Sophie and I will dig in on the sly." He tapped the door shut with his cowboy boot. "No point baiting Glenno's curiosity."

Tess heard the click-click-clop of Sophie's boot and crutches long before the girl popped up from around a corner down the hall. "Are you coming yet? Glenno thinks he got it on the first try."

Tess threw a sideways glance to her "host."

"I doubt Lolly will be happy to hear that."

The resulting grin did belong on a charming television star. "I won't tell if you don't."

* * *

By the time Cooper led his short-order hairstylist to the kitchen, Sophie was seated on one of four stools in front of a kitchen island, her crutches dispatched to a nearby corner. She spun on the stool's swivel seat, her leg swinging in anticipation.

"I've got a niece not too far from your age at Blue Thorn, you know," said Tess. "You'd like Audie."

A friend? Cooper pondered the possibility. His travel schedule hadn't afforded Sophie many chances to make friends—one of many things he was set to change—and one just across the road would be a blessing. All Sophie really needed was one soul her age who would see past the crutches to the treasure that was his darling daughter.

"Miss Tess," Sophie said in an amusingly formal tone, "this is Glenno. He's kinda everything."

“G’day to you.” Cooper watched Glenno chuckle at the “job description” as he extended a hand in greeting. “From the Buckton place, eh?”

Cooper had heard bits and pieces of the past tension between the former owner of this property and the Buckton family. Sophie neither knew nor cared about such neighbor relations. She simply grabbed the plate from one end of the counter and pulled it toward the middle open stool. “Taste ’em.”

Tess’s glance bounced among Copper, Sophie and Glenno before she sat. “They look like Lolly’s,” she offered, tilting a smile toward Sophie’s eager eyes. Actually, Glenno’s eyes looked just as eager.

“But do they taste like Lolly’s?” he encouraged, sitting beside Tess so that she was between him and Sophie. “That’d be the million-dollar question.”

With all three sets of eyes fixed on her, Tess picked up the square and had a bite. It seemed like ten minutes went by, even though Cooper was pretty sure it had only been seconds, before she smiled.

“Mr. Glenno, I think you lived up to your reputation.”

Glenno beamed. Sophie giggled happily. The tension Cooper had felt tighten his chest all day in how he was going to give Sophie the best day he could unwind a bit at the culinary victory.

“These are ninety-nine percent Lolly’s. And I couldn’t rightly say that the lacking one percent isn’t just pure loyalty to Lolly.” She took another bite as Sophie leaned in to watch.

Cooper made a big show of absconding with one of the blondies from the plate and began eating.

“Hey!” Sophie cried out. “No fair. I can test again, too, can’t I?”

As if he could deny Sophie anything on her birthday. Cooper slid the plate toward her while Glenno gave a grunt of victory and picked up the last confection. For a moment everyone ate in blissful silence. Cooper sent a prayer of thanks heavenward for the tiny, spontaneous party.

“You can’t tell her you’ve done this,” Tess said eventually. “I love Lolly too much to let her know you’ve figured out her recipe.”

“I promise you,” Cooper said, not bothering to hide his grin, “she’ll never know.”

“I’d never undercut the woman who made these,” Glenno said. “I’m not out to get anyone. I just like the challenge.”

“I just like the results,” Cooper said as he licked his fingers.

“I just like the eating,” Sophie said, sending them all into laughter. “Glenno, you’re the best. You should do Miss Tess’s brownies next.”

Tess shot Cooper a look. Cooper shot his daughter a look. “Sophie, hon, I promised Miss Tess we wouldn’t let Glenno swipe her grandma’s recipe.”

“Brownies?” Glenno looked intrigued and put out at the same time.

“I saw Dad hide ’em in the hall cabinet.” Sophie pronounced. “Want me to go get ’em?”

She began to slide off the stool until Cooper popped up and snatched the crutches out of her reach. “We’d better have another little chat about the virtues of discretion.”

“Dis-what?”

“Not telling secrets that aren’t yours to tell,” Cooper explained. “What do I always say?”

“Everybody doesn’t need to know everything.” Sophie turned back around and plunked her elbows on the counter. “But you love Uncle Hunter and you say he likes everybody to know everything.”

Proving my point exactly. Sophie was a little sponge, picking up on everything he said whether he liked it or not. “I do love Uncle Hunter. But I don’t always agree with him. Brothers are like that.”

“How would I know?” Sophie had been on a rant lately about not having siblings. He hated how lonely her childhood had been. He had good reasons to keep her from the Pine Method fans and fans from her, but that made for more seclusion than Grace would have ever wanted for their daughter.

Grace, God rest her soul. He seemed to miss his late wife more than ever these days. Back when it had been the three of them, their family unit had felt perfect and complete. But now he was

constantly aware of just how thoroughly he'd let Grace carry the burdens of parenting—and how inadequate he was to handle it without her, even with Glenno's help. There just weren't enough hours in a day to be the Pine Method professional the world expected him to be and the father Sophie needed him to be at the same time.

And it wasn't like there was other family to turn to. Hunter had no interest in domesticity and with Grace's parents halfway around the world and his own folks gone, family was in short supply. Cooper didn't really feel connected anywhere.

And that was going to change. He pulled Sophie into a hug, ruffling the curls that were so much like her mother's. "You don't know, that's why I'm telling ya." It was one of the reasons he was trying to get off the Pine Brothers' tour so he could make a go of settling down somewhere good for her. It had been different when she was very small and Grace was around, but hopping from tour to tour with Glenno and him was proving no way to grow up.

"Do you have brothers, Miss Tess?"

"Two of them. And a sister, too." She'd caught on to Sophie's pout, for she added, "They're not as much fun as you think some of the time."

"Miss Tess here's a twin."

As diversionary tactics went, it was a fine one. "No fooling! Does she look just like you?"

Tess laughed. "I hope not. My twin is my brother Luke. My older sister, Ellie, she's having twins and they'll be a boy and a girl, too. Luke and I are going to be their godparents. They'll be here in June, and I'm sure they'll be cute as buttons." She turned her eyes to Cooper. "Will you be here in June?"

"We'll be here forever," Sophie cut in.

He really needed to watch what details he gave that girl—or at least make her understand which ones to keep to herself. They still needed to play this close to the vest until he could get over the hump of extracting himself from Hunter.

"Forever?" Tess repeated. She'd caught the split-second exchange of glances that flashed between him and Glenno. "So you are buying?"

Sophie said, "Yep!" at the same time Cooper said, "Maybe."

How to cover that? Cooper wasn't foolish enough to doubt his secrecy led to speculation within the Texas community. It was perfectly reasonable for folks to think this ranch would simply take its place on the Pine Brothers' tour the way Hunter's ranch north of Houston had. Clearly, the Bucktons wouldn't be lining up to buy tickets.

This would all be better once he told Hunter. He just had to play it quiet until he could settle it within the family. Then he could exit the show and move forward with his plans to open a therapeutic horse ranch for kids like Sophie

For now he just nodded at his daughter and said, "How about those braids now?"

Chapter Three

"So..." Ellie said as she eased her swollen frame next to Tess on the overstuffed wicker couch on Gran's front porch the next day. "What's Cooper Pine like?" Ellie and her husband, Nash, had a house in town near the office where Nash was sheriff, but on days when Nash was on duty Ellie often came out to the ranch house where Gran loved to fuss over her very pregnant granddaughter.

"I'm just taking care of my girl," Gran would always say—even though at eighty-five Gran ought to start letting other people take care of her. Some days it was hard to judge which woman's body gave her more grief; swollen Ellie or aging Gran.

"He's nicer than he looks on television," Tess offered.

Gran gave a scandalous wink. "That must be pretty nice. Those Pine brothers are some fine-looking men. Good horse trainers, too," she added when Ellie rolled her eyes.

"His little girl is darling," Tess explained.

"So he's not married—or not married anymore—but a single dad?" Ellie asked. "How come no one knows about his little girl?"

Fishing for the right words to explain the girl's situation, Tess offered, "I hope it isn't her disability. She doesn't seem to let the fact that she has one leg slow her down a bit."

"One leg?" Gran's eyes popped. "Like an amputee?"

"I don't know," Tess answered. "She was wearing a frilly dress long enough that it was hard to tell anything beyond the fact that there was only one boot and that she walked with crutches. I didn't think it was right to ask. She wasn't wearing a prosthesis, though, and it certainly wasn't a new injury. She was faster than me on those things."

"I had no idea," Ellie said. "Like I said, they never mention a daughter on the show. Yes, I watch," she admitted when Tess gave her a look. "I have to spend a lot of time off my feet these days and they're entertaining when they bicker. Reminds me of Luke and Gunner."

"Or Luke and you, for that matter," Gran said to Tess. "There were days I thought you two would skin each other alive the way you fought. Did you find out his plans for the place? Is Gunner right to be worried that it will become some tourist attraction?"

Tess thought about the way Cooper had dodged her questions about his long-term plans. "Sophie said they would be there 'forever,' but he only said a very vague 'maybe.' Why hide plans no one would object to? I got the clear impression he isn't eager to tell anyone what he's up to."

"Well, he hasn't bought yet." Gran stirred her iced tea and looked out over the Blue Thorn pastures. "That gives us some time to figure out what's going on."

Tess followed her gaze, seeing the ranch with fresh eyes after being gone for as long as she had, traveling around the world on freelance photography assignments for a collection of travel guides. Over a hundred bison now roamed the grassy stretches Gran and Grandpa and then Dad had worked when the Blue Thorn was a cattle ranch. Gran had a right to be fiercely protective of what happened around the Blue Thorn. Bucktons had fought long and hard for generations to keep this ranch up and running, and no one wanted it to become the sideshow to a Pine Brothers' publicity circus.

Gran set down the glass. "We should get to know him. It's the right thing to do, and useful besides. How old did you say his girl is?"

"Six as of yesterday. Although she reminds me of Audie—a lot smarter and more mature than her years. I get the feeling nothing gets by that girl."

"Even better. You go on back over there tomorrow, bring them some bison burgers, and invite them to supper Saturday. Audie won't have school so the two girls can meet, and we can throw us a barbecue like he's never seen."

Tess laughed. "They barbecue in Australia, Gran. They barbecue in Korea, for that matter. And he's spent a fair amount of time in Texas. I think he's seen barbecue."

Gran grinned. "Not ours. The man's already tasted my brownies—how could he possibly turn us down?"

Tess envisioned Glenno dissecting Gran's brownies behind Cooper's back and just gave her grandmother a sigh. A second unannounced visit to Cooper and Sophie? Would that look odd? It wasn't like they had a phone number she could just call. She was pondering about how to word her invitation when she became aware of silence on the porch, and Gran's eyes fixed on her. "I'll go over there tomorrow."

"That's fine and dandy, but let's talk about you." Gran picked up her knitting—a baby blanket in cheery blocks of turquoise and white. Ellie was working on a sweater of the same color combination from her spot on the couch. "I'm glad you're back, but you still haven't really said why."

"I'm home to see Ellie's twins being born. To do the whole godparent thing with Luke. For Luke and Ruby's wedding. There are plenty of reasons to be here, so why wouldn't I visit now?"

Ellie shifted her weight on the couch. "You came home with four suitcases and two cameras. This isn't a visit." After a moment Ellie added, "Is it?"

How could she give an answer she didn't yet know herself? It was so, so good to be home and yet at the same time, she didn't know what her place was here anymore. Her other siblings had settled

so thoroughly into the running of the ranch and its side businesses. Where did she fit? Tess felt like the missing piece in a nearly finished puzzle—everything else was in its place but her. “I’m staying through the wedding, but I don’t know my schedule after that.”

That was a very sketchy way of glossing over the fact that she’d sold all the rest of her equipment and her furniture, walked out on an apartment lease and didn’t have new work lined up. “I don’t know my schedule” was miles away from “my life is in total collapse because of what happened in Adelaide.”

Gran let the knitting fall to her lap. “Don’t get me wrong, sugar, I’m thrilled to have you back on the ranch. I just get the sense there’s more to why you’re here than babies and weddings. I know you. You won’t tell me till you’re good and ready. But I just want you to know I’m ready to listen when the time comes.”

She’d have to tell them eventually. Gran was right—she always did in the end. But sharing this story would be harder than anything she’d ever had to confess before. She’d loved sending back reports from exotic places all over the world, swooping in for short stays where she could dole out bits of news at her own speed. The months she’d spent in Adelaide had turned her life upside down—in both good and bad ways—and she hadn’t yet come up with the words to tell even these people—who loved her—what had transpired. Both intertwined stories were long, emotional tales, and she couldn’t find the words to start the telling. Or to whom.

Should she confide in Luke, who knew her best despite their long estrangement, which had now ended? Gunner, who’d become such a wise leader of the family she hardly recognized him from the rebellious teen who’d left before their father died? Compassionate Ellie, who knew what it was like to have a relationship go sour on a grand scale? Or Gran, who would never judge no matter what Tess revealed? Gran would understand how you can love in an instant for no good reason, how someone can yank the foundation out from under your life in ways you never saw coming.

She could start with Gran, but not here and not now. This had to go in bits and pieces, one bit at a time—only she couldn’t figure out which bit to tell first. For a split second Tess thought it might be easiest to tell Audie, whose “soul was far beyond her years” as Gran used to say. But Audie was far too young to hear about how people you thought you loved could rob you blind.

Tess thought about Bardo. How could she ever explain the way her heart had moved when she’d looked into the little boy’s sweet brown eyes? How he’d told her his name meant “river”? How the orphan’s sadness clung to her in a way she knew would never subside? Four was far too young to be so old and sad. She thought back to yesterday, when she’d seen Sophie all dressed up for her birthday and radiating happiness at her presents. Watching that little girl’s joy only made her ache for the little boy from the Australian foster home she’d met on a photo shoot.

He’d stolen her heart in a single afternoon. Tess had started visiting every week, then twice a week, then every other day. The fierce craving to be Bardo’s mother—something that made no sense and was for all practical purposes nearly impossible—came out of nowhere. The Aussie foster home system worked so well that orphan adoptions of any kind were all but nonexistent. Less than one hundred per year to Aussie families. A twenty-five-year-old, single, American woman didn’t stand a chance. How could she explain how she’d thrown herself and all of her savings into trying anyway? At the urging of a man she thought loved her but turned out to just want her money? The failure felt too big to speak. Too humiliating to share, even with the people who loved her best.

I came home to family because all of a sudden I need to be a family but can’t. Because I lost a lot of money trying. Because Bardo needs my love and I need his but a thousand rules and regulations won’t ever let that happen. Because I’ve been fooled by a man I never should have trusted. Because I’m deep in debt and grieving for something I never had and can’t ever have. I have to figure out what’s next, but I haven’t a clue where to go from here.

Gran’s eyes softened as Tess realized her eyes burned with tears. The old woman reached out and squeezed Tess’s hand—a wordless comfort for a wordless plea.

"I've got some things I need to work through." She fumbled the words out, afraid if she said more the whole story would come rushing out of her before she was ready.

Gran gave her hand another squeeze and offered a sad smile. "Don't we all, child. Don't we all."

* * *

Cooper looked up from some landscaping sketches to peer out his office window at the sound of a vehicle coming up the drive. Who would...?

At the same time he heard Sophie racing down the hall. "Dad, Miss Tess is back!"

He'd told Glenno not to let just anybody in when the intercom buzzed—but he was hard pressed to say this interruption bothered him. Still, why was she back?

Sophie appeared in his study doorway, grinning. He was an introvert, craving his privacy, but clearly Sophie took after her extroverted mother. Her face fairly lit up at the prospect of company. "Well, you ought to go get the door then, girlie." He stood as Sophie took off toward the front door.

She practically squealed her hello to poor Tess. He was relieved to hear Tess laugh at the enthusiastic greeting—Sophie was a bit much at times, but he loved her exuberance. He'd always thought it God's gift to a little girl who'd have to scale a mountain of obstacles in life. When he made it to the front door, Tess and Sophie were sitting on a hallway bench while Sophie peered into a brown paper bag.

"What'cha got there, Sophie?"

Sophie looked up with wide eyes. "Bison burgers." She thought for a moment then asked, "What's a bison?"

He knew the Blue Thorn Ranch had been revitalized from a failing cattle ranch into a thriving bison ranch by Tess's older brother Gunner. "It's another name for a buffalo."

Sophie looked at Tess. "You can eat 'em? How do they taste?"

"Delicious. You can eat their meat, you can wear their hides, you can even make yarn out of their coats." Tess leaned in. "You just can't pet them. Or ride them."

That made Sophie giggle. He'd pointed the huge brown animals out to Sophie on the rare times they'd gone off the ranch together and some of the Buckton family's animals stood near the road that separated their ranches.

"Actually, I'm rather glad you haven't met them yet. There was a time when a few of our bison were known to wander over to this land. The former owner used to get rather steamed about it."

Another reason Paul Larkey wasn't everyone's favorite neighbor. Would that help the case for what he wanted to do when he shifted from tenant to owner of the ranch? Or hurt it? You have to buy it from the foreclosure bank first, which means you have to tell Hunter first, he reminded himself. "Nope," he offered. "We've not had any bison come to visit that I know of."

"You've got a lot of open land here," she said. "Larkey used to raise cattle, but I expect you know that."

She was polite enough not to go on to "So what are you going to raise?" but it was clear she was thinking it. It made him wonder what prompted today's visit. Was this a Buckton family fact-finding mission?

He must have scowled because she got to her feet. "I came with an invitation."

"And bison burgers," Sophie added as she handed the bag to Cooper and maneuvered to her feet.

Cooper was impressed that Tess didn't try to help Sophie up. Sophie could do most things for herself, and was never shy about asking for help if she needed it. Anyone who treated his little girl like every other little girl won points with him. "An invitation?"

"To dinner Friday night. You and Sophie and Glenno, if he promises to keep quiet about any recipe swiping. And...anyone else here."

Was she fishing to see if there was a Mrs. Pine? "Just the three of us." In truth, clients would eventually visit on therapy days, but he opted out of mentioning that complication. Two months ago

it felt like he couldn't breathe word of the equine therapy services he wanted to provide, but he was slowly feeling an urge to let it out. Hunter had to be the first to know—but it sure would be nice to hear someone else say, "You're not crazy. An equine therapy ranch is a good thing, and you should do it."

"Well," Tess replied to his earlier comment, "then we'd like 'just the three of you' to come to supper Saturday night."

Cooper had to ask, remembering the suspicious looks Luke had given him in Lolly's not two days ago. "And your brothers are okay with this?"

"It was my grandmother's idea, and Gran trumps everyone on the Blue Thorn. Besides, I think getting to know each other is a better idea than throwing each other frosty looks in town, don't you think?"

So she had noticed. And it felt like she was on his side. Cooper wasn't prepared for how that wrapped itself around him. His much-lauded instincts told him she wasn't being nice to him just because he was Cooper Pine. It startled him how refreshing he found the realization.

Sophie dragged him from his thoughts by tugging on his arm. "Can I go bring these to Glenno? Can we have them for lunch?"

"Sure thing." He watched her clip down the hall before turning to Tess. "Thanks for the burgers. And the invite."

"You're welcome."

There was an odd, stretched-out moment where they realized they were alone together with nothing much to talk about. Tess shrugged and looked around the great room behind them. "You know, it's not at all like I pictured it."

"How's that?"

He walked ahead of her into the room. The space had too much dark wood in it—the place needed lightening up in a million ways—but there was a solidness to the property Cooper could see under all the dated fixtures. When the rental manager had showed him the place as "a real bargain," he'd had this inexplicable sense of him needing it and it needing him. Not that he'd ever voice anything so odd.

"We used to make up stories about the inside of this place when I was growing up." She looked at the room with just a hint of the long-lost feeling he'd had at his first look.

It couldn't be her first look—she'd grown up across the road from the place, hadn't she? "You mean you've never seen the inside of the house before?"

"Dad and Mr. Larkey were never friends. My brothers and I used to dare each other to see how close we could get to this house before old man Larkey chased us off. Gunner told me he saw hunting trophies through the windows once, and we made up stories about how he got them."

"There were two or three on the walls when I got here. I took them down before Sophie arrived." He looked around the room, finding it still too dark and bare for the place Sophie would grow up.

"She'll love Martins Gap. Sure, we've got some of the small-town gossipy stuff going on, but you'll find most folks will take to her like ducks to water." She turned to him, evidently deciding to be direct. "I'll warn you, those burgers and the supper invitation come with strings attached. My family really wants to know what your plans are."

That was no surprise. "Texans are a neighborly lot, but two visits in four days tells me y'all are seriously curious." He used the colloquialism as a joke, but as soon as it was out of his mouth he realized it sounded absurd in his accent.

"Just so you know, you'll be grilled Saturday night." She went on. "In the most polite way possible, but grilled none the less. I figured it was fair to warn you."

"Consider me warned," he replied as he opened the doors that led out to the patio. She'd made a gesture on her part, he ought to do the same. "So I'll say this. I've got plans under consideration. I'm just not of a mind to share them yet." He tucked his hands into his pockets. "Will that be enough?"

She raised one eyebrow. “I doubt it.” She exhaled and sat on the low stone wall that surrounded the patio. “But I get what it’s like to not be ready to tell the whole world all your plans. The need to keep secrets. But my brothers are going to make it hard on you. You shouldn’t blame them—they’ve fought hard to keep the Blue Thorn going and to make it a success, and they’re afraid whatever you’ve got planned might be a threat.”

Cooper sat in one of the old wooden chairs that had been left with the property. “So you came to feed me, invite me and warn me?”

She smiled. “Well, yes. You should also know I think Audie could be a great friend to Sophie, and it’ll help if Gunner’s not suspicious of your motives.”

He stretched his legs out, crossing one boot over the other. “And what does Gunner think my motives are?”

“Honestly?”

“Straight up, mate. I’ve probably heard it all before anyway.”

Her back straightened. “He’s worried he’ll wake up one morning to a full-blown Piney fan festival out his front window. He thinks you’ll be bringing the whole TV thing here, complete with crowds and fuss.”

“That I’ll open a souvenir shop in town next to the Blue Thorn Store where he sells his stuff?” he continued, fully aware he was pushing her buttons. “How would that be different from what your family already does? Wouldn’t both offer products to the public that support a family ranch business?”

“I wouldn’t put a single store selling bison meat and yarn in the same boat as a franchise pitching arena shows, DVDs and T-shirts.” When he raised an eyebrow she added, “We don’t have a fan club.”

“So everyone expects me to be the showman Hunter is.”

“And you’re not?”

She had him there. He hadn’t given them any reason to think he didn’t share Hunter’s obsession with a high profile.

Still, that didn’t make his brother the bad guy here. He wasn’t even involved in what this ranch would become—even if he didn’t know that yet. “Hunter is my brother. I owe lots of what I have to him and what he’s done.”

He didn’t quite hide the unspoken “but...” tacked on the end of that thought. She evidently knew a dodge when she saw one. “Is he your partner in this? In whatever it is you’re thinking of doing here?”

He’d heard the Bucktons were stubborn, but he hadn’t expected Tess to be this relentless. And she was the one who seemed to be on his side! Just what was he in for on Saturday?

“I know you don’t owe us an explanation,” she said, softening her tone, “but it would help things if you told us what you aren’t doing here if you can’t tell us what you are going to be doing.”

Cooper didn’t like being pushed, but he also didn’t like starting off on the wrong foot with people who would be his neighbors and hopefully friends to Sophie. He pulled in a breath then let it out slowly. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She frowned. “That’s not much to go on.”

“It’s not anything I want made public. At least, not yet. So that’s the best I can do. Even at a barbecue.”

“Well, I’m not going to take back the invitation, if that’s what you’re thinking. You’re still invited. And warned.” She paused for a second before offering him a startling smile, completely out of place given the tension of their conversation just now. “I hope you’ll come.”

Chapter Four

Cooper’s second thoughts Saturday morning did not meet with Sophie’s approval. His daughter looked as if he’d plunged a knife through her tiny little heart when he suggested declining the Bucktons’ barbecue invitation. “Of course I want to go to the party!” she whined, draping herself across the couch in pint-size devastation. If he put his foot down and begged off, he’d have a

miserable night here, that was clear. “I wanna go,” she moaned, limbs stricken akimbo in flailing disappointment. “I hafta go.”

Cooper began picking up the pieces of the game they had been playing. “You don’t hafta go anywhere. And it’s not a party. It’s just a supper.” A supper he doubted would be much fun for him, at least, even if it meant seeing Tess Buckton again. Then again, Sophie would meet Audie, and that was worth enduring the “grilling” Tess had said was coming, wasn’t it?

“It’s a barbecue. A bison barbecue. I’ve never been to one before.” One hand lay across her forehead in such a drama-queen pose Cooper wondered what movies she’d been watching. “And now I’ll never go.”

He tried to swallow his reluctance as he slid the lid onto the game box. “I know you like Miss Tess and all...”

“I love Miss Tess. I wanna meet the little girl at her ranch. She’d said we’d like each other.” Sophie didn’t have to actually say “and now you’re taking it all away” because her eyes screamed it at him. “Why’d you hafta fight with her?”

“We didn’t fight.”

Sophie sat up and crossed her arms over her chest. “She didn’t seem very happy when she came in the kitchen to say goodbye.”

“We had a discussion. Maybe a difference of opinion, but not a fight. That’s different.” He pointed at Sophie. “Just like you and I are having a difference of opinion right now.”

Sophie’s chin practically sank itself into her chest. “No, we’re fighting. Miss Tess invited us to a party and you’re saying we’re not going. Did she take her invitation back?”

Cooper made it a point never to lie to Sophie, which made her ability to ask just the wrong question all the more exasperating. Tess had, in fact, reiterated her invitation despite their tense discussion. “No, she didn’t, but it still won’t be any fun if we go.”

“It’d be fun for me,” Sophie said softly. Her tone pinched his heart hard. What father wants to disappoint his daughter? She was right, though—it probably would be fun for her, even if it might end up torture for him.

She looked up at him with her “sad puppy eyes,” her ultimate weapon against his willpower. Life had denied Sophie so much—a normal body, a mother to grow up with, family to surround her—he hated to be the one to deny her anything else.

“You really want to go?”

Clearly sensing he was weakening, she upped her game. In one move, she flung herself from the couch onto his lap. “More than anything. Pleeceaaaaassssee can we?”

He knew that tone. The stubborn streak that got Sophie through the aftermath of her accident had a dark side, and he’d just landed in the middle of it. He’d hear that whiny request nonstop until he relented. Still, on things that really mattered, he could dig his heels in and be just as stubborn as Sophie.

But did this really matter? Could he tiptoe his way through a night of relentless Buckton questions if it meant Sophie could make friends with another girl near her age? It couldn’t get that bad—no one would want to launch an argument in front of the kids. If he showed up a bit late and only stayed until Sophie’s bedtime, surely he could stand it. I’ve been stepped on, bitten, thrown, knocked over and kicked by the worst horses on two continents, he reasoned. How bad could half a dozen Bucktons be?

“Okay, we’ll go. Now go and see if Glenno’s ready for you to help set the table.” Glenno had rigged a special backward sort of backpack that allowed Sophie to carry plates and silverware to the table one at a time. It took much longer, but Cooper liked that Glenno was always quick to adapt the standard child chores to Sophie’s abilities. Besides, the fifteen minutes it took Sophie to set three place settings was a bit of peace and quiet he sorely needed at the end of some days.

That peace and quiet was broken by rings from the telephone. Hunter's tone as he said, "G'day, mate," told him his unreturned phone call from earlier in the week hadn't gone unnoticed. "I know you're supposed to be on holiday, but have you got a minute for some good news?"

Cooper leaned back on the leather sofa. "Sure."

"The blokes in legal did a good job. We've got a signed statement from Lynette Highland. No more worries in that department. If she shows up anywhere near you, we have immediate grounds for a restraining order."

Cooper sighed. While he didn't want to talk about his future plans, he wanted to discuss this issue even less. "I'm glad to have that whole thing over with."

"You and me both, mate. What a circus that was."

Lynette was a production assistant—a very good, very pretty, production assistant—who had worked on the show. Three months ago she'd taken the very small inch of attention Cooper paid her and tried to run ten miles with it.

Making sure that Cooper had everything he needed was part of her job, and he'd barely noticed at first when she'd dialed up her attentions, constantly checking in with him and flirting all the while. When he had noticed, he'd been flattered and had allowed himself to cautiously flirt back, thinking a little dating might be nice. It had been the first time since Grace that a woman had even halfway appealed to him. Even Hunter had approved of Lynette as Cooper's "first wade back into the dating pool." They'd both been stunningly wrong—a Pine Brothers' first, to be sure.

The first date had been pleasant enough, but afterward her attentions toward him went from flattering to obsessive. Soon it had turned into a nightmare of phone calls, notes, far too intimate emails, even trying to show up at a hotel where he was staying on tour. He'd talked with Lynette. Hunter had sat with her. Even the producer very bluntly telling her she was endangering her job didn't seem to make a dent in her determination to win him over by every means available—without seeming to realize that all she was doing was frightening him away.

Lynette believed she had "found her meal ticket"—as Hunter began to put it—and didn't seem to think her job needed to matter much anymore. By the end, legal had had to step in and talk about a court order. The great blessing in it all was that sheer logistics—or God's mercy, as Cooper saw it—had kept Lynette from ever meeting Sophie. The whole business was the tipping point for Cooper's decision to leave the Pine Method.

"So now we can get on with the new season without having any of that drama getting in the way. I gave the legal guys a 'good-on-ya' bonus for handling it quiet-like. That's not the kind of press any of us needs."

The new season is already being planned? You can't wait forever, mate, you'll have to tell him soon. But "soon" doesn't have to mean "now."

"No new season talk for a bloke on holiday. I'm glad for this news, but the rest can wait." He ignored the pang of guilt he felt for changing the subject. "What's this big surprise that's taking you so long to ship Sophie for her birthday?"

"Should be there soon. She's gonna love it."

Hunter had a flair for grand gestures that often defied common sense or, at least, parental wisdom. He relished his role as the indulgent favorite—if only—uncle, and had been known to go a bit overboard. There was a tricked-out, pink-and-purple ride-on Jeep on Hunter's ranch with "Sophie" painted on the side to prove it.

"Does it require safety gear?" It was only half a joke.

"Not a bit. Smaller than a breadbox, this one."

"What do they say about big surprises coming in small packages?"

"Relax, mate, you'll like this one. Although I'll say this much—it's something you'd never get her."

“Well,” Cooper laughed, feeling a bit of the strain vanish between them, “that leaves the door wide-open.”

“I’ll be in on the eighteenth and we can catch up then,” came Hunter’s voice. “Gotta run—we’re heading off to the last location in an hour. Kiss Sophie for me.”

“Will do. ‘Bye.”

Cooper sat back after putting the phone down, a bit disappointed in himself for throwing away another opportunity to have his much-needed talk with Hunter—but still glad to know that whole business with Lynette was behind him. He ran his hands down his face, remembering the one mistake of a kiss. He’d been so careful up until then, knowing he was only on the outer edges of his grieving for Grace. He’d kept the loneliness at bay with business, but as Lynette had proved, it hadn’t solved anything.

Will it get worse or better out here, Lord? Help me be more careful. I can handle a problem like Lynette, but Sophie will latch onto anyone I let close.

Anyone like Tess Buckton. Had she already gotten too close? Could he keep things within clearly defined margins where those intriguing blue eyes were concerned?

The barbecue might tell him soon enough.

* * *

Tess’s cousin Witt Buckton raised an eyebrow as he handed a big package of bison burgers over the meat counter window. Officially in charge of the Blue Thorn Ranch’s food truck that sold burgers and sides in downtown Austin, he wasn’t at the Blue Thorn Store very often. Some of that had to do with his professional focus. A lot more had to do with the truck’s pretty chef, Jana. Tess only had to see those two together for a handful of minutes at Ellie’s wedding to know things had heated up in more than the truck’s tiny mobile kitchen. The couple had married last August, and Tess had been sorry not to be able to make it back in for her cousin’s wedding.

“Who’s coming to supper?” Witt asked, noting the large amount of burgers she’d ordered.

“Cooper Pine and his daughter.”

“I heard he’s renting the old Larkey place, but I didn’t know he had a family. Y’all getting a new neighbor?”

“It’s anybody’s guess. He says it’s just him and his daughter for the summer. Gunner and Luke think he’s got plans—maybe to buy the place and make it part of the Pine Method franchise—but Cooper won’t say. I warned him he’ll get more of a grilling than the burgers, but he’s coming anyway.”

Witt laughed. “Brave soul.”

“How’s Austin’s latest foodie power couple?”

Witt nearly glowed. “Will it sound dumb if I say ridiculously happy?”

Everyone within the Buckton family seemed ridiculously happy these days. Everyone except her, that is. It felt almost freakish to be nursing such private, painful wounds among all these gleeful relatives. “You’ve put on a few pounds,” she teased. “Being married to a chef obviously agrees with you.” The spark in Witt’s eye clearly had to do with more than just good cooking.

He came out from behind the counter. “So, Ellie thinks you’re back to stay—are you?”

It was a fair question, seeing how Gunner, then Ellie and then Luke had all returned to the ranch for good. Even Witt, who had grown up only visiting the Blue Thorn from his father’s ranch, had chosen to join the Blue Thorn business. Still, the number of times she was asked that question was beginning to niggle under her skin. She tried to laugh it off. “I’m here for a stretch, between the twins coming and Luke’s wedding. Beyond that, I don’t know.”

She fingered the selection of bison yarn gloves and scarves that hung on a nearby wall, evidence of how her sister Ellie had added to the family business. Now, Ellie was busy putting the final touches on baby blankets and booties. More happiness to envy and not have. She wouldn’t ever be asking Ellie to knit scarves or hats for Bardo. Those joys would belong to his foster parents, not her. She planted a “happy auntie” smile on her face. “I’m in between assignments, so everything’s up for grabs. Could

be back to Adelaide, could be off to the Alps.” That wasn’t entirely true. She’d sold nearly all of her equipment to pay the adoption fees her adviser, Jasper Garvey, had required. Jasper had also made her believe he was helping because he loved her. She’d been ready to ditch her globetrotting lifestyle to settle down with Bardo, at whatever job would keep her in one place. She could try to roust up new freelance jobs and the equipment to cover her debts—and probably ought to—but that would take confidence and bravery she no longer felt she had.

Tess changed the subject. “I hear there’s a second big blue bus in the works?” Everyone teased Witt for the bright, almost eye-searing color he’d chosen for the food truck, but no one could deny it stood out, making it easy to spot—an important trait for a food truck in a competitive market.

His smile widened. “Launches in about a month. Jana says Jose is ready, and with Marny coming in the store full-time to fill in for Ellie, we’re ready to expand.”

Jose, who had been a protégé of Will and Jana’s, was about to become a food truck chef in his own right rather than working with Jana as her assistant chef. Marny was a girl Ellie had mentored through a teen program at the church who’d had her share of problems but had made a way for herself thanks to Ellie and work at the Blue Thorn Store.

Gunner, Luke and Ellie were settled and happy. Not that they—or even Gran—hadn’t known hard times. It was just that they’d all come shining through those challenges, and Tess couldn’t clearly see that in the cards for her anymore.

“Are you and Jana coming tonight?”

Witt shook his head. “The truck’s got to be downtown for an event. It’ll be a hot date night in the hot kitchen, I’m afraid.” His words spoke of work but his eyes beamed with the pleasure of working with his bride.

I’m only twenty-five, Tess told herself. That’s too young to feel like that will never happen for me.

“Have fun tonight,” Witt called as another customer came into the store.

“We’ll have something tonight,” Tess replied, recalling the tense nature of her conversation with Cooper Pine. “I’m just not sure it will be fun.”

Chapter Five

Tess had once had the opportunity to photograph a famous high-wire act. She’d been allowed up on the platform with the tightrope-walker, given access to the breathtaking perspective from way up high.

It rather felt like tonight’s barbecue.

She was watching Cooper balance his way carefully through a barrage of questions, dancing over the heights of her family’s barely veiled curiosity. Were it not for the instant friendship that sprung up between Sophie and Audie, she wasn’t sure how the evening would have gone.

“Daddy didn’t want to come,” Sophie admitted as Tess and Audie gave her a tour of the barns and led her up to the fence that held Daisy and Russet, the only two bison on the ranch that were safe for human contact. “Safe human contact” was a relative term, meaning animals on one side of a very strong fence, humans on the other. But unlike the animals out in the pasture, it was possible to get close to these bison, and even to pet them, without spooking them.

I can just guess he wasn’t eager, Tess thought. “But you’re here.” She made sure to say it with a smile.

“I convinced him after you had the different of opinion,” Sophie pronounced, clearly quoting her father’s words. She was either unaware of the level of her frankness or didn’t especially care that she was revealing information Cooper probably didn’t want Tess to know. She’d known Sophie for less than a week and was already one hundred percent charmed by the girl. As to her father? The jury was still out on him.

“Russet got his name from me on account of his color,” Audie explained. “Bison babies are rusty colored when they are born. They only turn brown when they grow up.” Audie leaned in toward

Sophie. “Gunnerdad thought I was going to give him a girly name like Rainbow Sparkle when he let me name her.”

“That’s silly!” Sophie said as the pair of girls burst into laughter.

“He said nothing on his ranch would ever have that name,” Audie shared through giggles.

The sound of two girls’ laughter, even at the expense of her brother for his now-infamous worry over Audie’s naming choice, melted Tess’s heart. If joy had a sound, Tess thought it would be very much like those two right now. Did Bardo have friends to laugh with?

“What’s so funny over here?” came Cooper’s voice from behind them. “And who’s this big fella?”

Tess let Audie, who never tired of introducing Daisy and Russet to guests, do the honors. “He’s Russet,” her niece said, pointing to the young male bison.

“Audie named him,” Sophie offered. “And not Rainbow Sparkle.” More giggles.

Cooper raised one eyebrow and scratched his chin. “I’m guessing there’s a story there?” he said to Tess.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Tess replied.

“And this is Daisy,” Audie continued. “She’s the bison who kept going over to visit your ranch when the mean man owned it.”

“I’d heard a few of your bison took a shine to wandering about,” Cooper said to Audie with a teasing tone and a wide smile. The first smile Tess had seen on him tonight, as a matter of fact.

“The cat in the barn had kittens two weeks ago,” Audie said to Sophie. “Wanna go see if they’ll play with us?”

No little girl on the planet could say no to that request. Within seconds Sophie and Audie were racing off toward the barn, chatting and laughing as if they’d known each other for months instead of hours.

“She ratted you out, you know,” Tess said as they watched the pair amble off.

Cooper merely adjusted his hat on his head and made a grunting sound.

“According to her, ‘Daddy didn’t want to come.’ And we had a ‘different of opinion.’”

Cooper put one boot up on the corral fence. “Well, I was warned.”

“You were also invited. And they’re having a ball, Sophie and Audie.”

He looked at her. “I’m glad for that, really I am.”

He didn’t have to say that he wasn’t sure it was worth the full-out inquisition he was putting up with tonight to give Sophie that fun. His aggravation with the questioning was clear to everyone—except, maybe, Sophie and Audie.

Tess didn’t want this to be the last time Cooper Pine set foot on the Blue Thorn Ranch. There had to be a way to bridge the gap between her family and his. “Honestly, Cooper, I don’t get the secrecy. It’s only hurting you, making folks suspect the worst.”

She should have kept her mouth shut. Cooper’s face fell sharply. “I don’t owe you—any of you—more explanation than what I’ve said. No matter how nice you are to Sophie.”

Tess pushed off the corral fence where she’d been leaning. “I would not use Sophie to get to you, ever. I’m not that kind of person, and we’re not that kind of family. Sophie will always be welcome here no matter what kind of circus you decide to put on over there.”

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