

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

Her Texas Cowboy

Jill Lynn



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The sweetest reunion in Texas... When Rachel Maddox returns to her hometown of Fredericksburg, Texas, avoiding her ex is much easier said than done. Still nursing the broken heart Rachel caused years earlier, rancher-next-door Hunter McDermott figures he can be cordial for the brief time she's in town—maybe they can even be friends. But how do you forge just a friendship with someone you've always pictured as your bride?

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HER TEXAS COWBOY

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"I would help you."

The words were out of his mouth before he'd had time to think, but once they registered, he decided the idea wasn't so crazy. If he was going to follow through with the two of them getting along and putting the past behind them, he might as well jump with both feet.

Curiosity and concern mingled in the depths of her distractingly beautiful green eyes. Maybe even a bit of fear. "Why?"

"Why not?"

It seemed easier to answer that way than to tell her the truth. There was one thing he'd never seen his father and mother do—make amends. Forgive. Move on. Therefore that was exactly what Hunter planned to do.

And this way, when Rachel did her next disappearing act for the job she wanted and came back to visit her family, she and Hunter would be able to get along. Wish each other well.

She studied the toes of her camel boots as though they held the answer to all of the world's problems. "It was nice of you to offer, but I can't accept."

Couldn't? Or wouldn't?

Being confident of this very thing,

that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

—Philippians 1:6

[Dear Reader,](#)

Rachel was a broken teen in *Falling for Texas*, and I was so excited to write a redemption story for her. But as it goes in life, sometimes our best-laid plans get disrupted.

Between books two and three (this one), I lost a friend to cancer. Before she passed, we wrote a book together. After, I had a hard time writing fiction again. I went round and round with Rachel and Hunter's story. Finally it all came together. But I felt a lot of pressure to get it all right. To complete it. To do it on my own instead of crashing into Jesus and trusting His timing.

I am the type, like Rachel, who wants to write my own redemption story. As if I can work hard enough or earn enough grace to cover my mistakes. Which, of course, is the opposite of the definition of grace.

Rachel struggles to show everyone she's changed. And she has. But she forgets that she's already loved and forgiven. That human judgments don't count. Only God's opinion matters. The moment Jesus gave up His life on the cross, her redemption story (and mine and yours) was completed.

I love to connect with readers. Find me at facebook.com/JillLynnAuthor or at instagram.com/JillLynnAuthor for conversations about life and God and everything in between.

My newsletter is where I send out announcements about upcoming books and sales. Sign up at Jill-Lynn.com/news.

Jill Lynn

To the God who makes all things possible—even books that feel impossible—all glory and honor to You.

T, S & L—I'm so thankful home is wherever we are together. There's nowhere I'd rather be than with the three of you.

To my editor, Shana Asaro—Thank you for your hard work and dedication. Your wisdom and guidance is priceless to me.

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[Chapter One](#)

Time to make a break for it.

Rachel Maddox beelined for the back of the church and the sanctuary of the outdoors.

In the last five minutes, since the service had ended, she'd been cornered by three well-meaning women. Each had wanted to know every detail of her life since she'd left town six years ago. The first had wrinkled her nose with confusion when Rachel mentioned her future plans, instead—moving to Houston for a high school guidance counselor position she hoped to get. As though she hadn't understood Rachel's desire to hightail it out of Fredericksburg as quickly as possible.

The second had been hard of hearing, and she'd asked what perfume Rachel was wearing. Since the answer was none, she'd tried to change the topic, but after numerous requests, she'd finally piped up and said, "It must be my deodorant," at a volume high enough to have several confused glances swing in her direction. *Sigh.*

Number three had questioned why she wasn't married yet—as if twenty-four equaled old maid status—all while giving her a pointed look that said she knew exactly why. Rachel had been reduced to a teenager in that moment—as though her old mistakes, attitude and poor decisions were strapped to her back for the world to see.

Ouch.

The nosiness was just another reason she wanted out of this small Texas town she'd grown up in. Rachel had this strange desire not to live in a place where she'd been a mess. It was time to start somewhere new, and just as soon as she got the job in Houston, that's exactly what she planned to do.

She dodged around two older gentlemen, the need to escape causing her throat to constrict.

Rachel had grown used to anonymity over the last few years. She attended big churches where nobody knew her name and lived in a city where people didn't stop her at the grocery store to chat about the weather or to ask how her sweet nephews were doing. This town was suffocating her, and she'd only been home a few days.

How was she going to survive a month or two?

People parted before her, and she clicked along in her sleeveless blue pencil dress and strappy brown wedges, the taste of victory and freedom spurring her forward.

When a little girl darted out in front of her, Rachel screeched to a stop. Tiny strawberry-blond pigtailed bounced on the top of the girl's head like small antennae. Based on the fact that she roamed the sanctuary without a parent in tow, Rachel assumed she must be escaping, too. They were kindred spirits.

She only looked to be around two years old. Too small to continue her romp of freedom alone. So much for her escape plan. Rachel knelt down, gently touching the child's arm. "Where's your mama, sweetie?"

"Mama." The girl's face broke into a smile. Adorable. Not exactly helpful, but definitely cute. "Should we go find her?"

The tot's head bobbed. Rachel attempted to take her hand, but the little girl didn't budge. When Rachel opened her arms, the girl came right to her. No stranger danger with this one. Rachel scooped her up and stood, a sweet orange scent reminiscent of the push-up treats she used to eat as a kid tickling her senses as she scanned the space for a harried mom. None appeared. Hmm. She couldn't exactly drop the toddler in the lost and found.

And then, instead of a worried mom, she saw a man steaming toward her. One she knew well. Hunter McDermott. Never fun to run smack-dab into a past mistake. And to think, she'd been so close to making a getaway.

He stopped in front of her, and to her surprise, the little girl lunged into his arms. Hunter...had a daughter? Rachel hadn't heard that he'd married. But then, when her sister-in-law, Olivia, started telling her about local news, Rachel often tuned out.

"Rach, I didn't realize you were home." Surprise laced his voice, joining the quirk of his eyebrows. The fact that he'd used her nickname seemed lost on him. "Sorry about that. Kinsley's a bit of an escape artist."

"It's okay. I completely understand." But, then again, he should know that. Hadn't he been upset with her for making a break for it six years ago?

Time had barely aged him. Hunter had never lacked in the spine-tingling looks department, yet he managed to pull it off without any effort. Of course he'd wear a casual, short-sleeved plaid shirt and jeans to church along with cowboy boots. His cropped, dark blond hair looked as though he'd shoved a hand through it, glanced in the mirror and shrugged. He somehow managed to look laid-back and dangerous all at the same time. Two good words to describe the man who'd trampled all over her heart before she'd left for college. Though he would probably claim she'd been the wrecking ball.

"You home to see your family?"

"I just finished grad school and now I'm staying here while waiting to hear about a high school guidance counselor position I'm hoping—" *planning* "—to get in Houston." Rachel had already filled out tons of paperwork and done one interview over Skype.

His jaw hardened, brow pinched. "Sounds like you plan to escape as fast as you can."

She strived for polite, resisting the temptation to roll her eyes at the jab. She'd matured over the years, hadn't she? She could handle an adult conversation with Hunter. "Is this your daughter?"

"Kinsley?" Hunter lifted the girl higher, grinning at her. The softening of his face caused a tightening in her chest. Once upon a time she'd craved that smile of his as much as oxygen. "No. She's my niece. Autumn's oldest. She's pregnant with their second. I'm not married."

The words dug like a knife and twisted. He could have added *because of you* to the end, just to make the torture more complete. It was true he'd asked her to marry him once. But they'd been young—way too young. And she'd wanted out. A chance to start over where she hadn't been an immature teenager. Time to pursue her dreams. Was that so wrong?

Rachel still had hopes and aspirations that didn't involve this town. After high school, she'd gone to Colorado for college and concentrated on her studies. Now she planned to focus on her career.

Houston was four hours away. Close enough that she could see her nephews whenever she made the drive and yet far enough that she could start fresh. Rachel wanted to be in Texas and somewhat close to her brother, his wife and their kids—they were her only immediate family, since their parents had passed away when she'd been thirteen. But she didn't want to live in Fredericksburg. She enjoyed bigger cities. Liked everyone not knowing what she was up to and then gossiping about it.

For instance, just the fact that she was conversing with Hunter would cause a ripple that would echo across the smooth surface of this town.

"Hunter. Rachel."

Their heads both snapped in the direction of the voice. The associate pastor, Greg Tendra, approached, sporting a grin that wasn't mirrored on Hunter's face or hers. He wore a green dress shirt tucked into black pants and no tie. The man was an inch or two shorter than Rachel, with raven curly hair, and the smell of spicy aftershave wafted with him.

"I'm glad to see you two have met."

A laugh almost escaped from her throat, but she managed to stem it before it burst out. Being new to town, Greg obviously didn't know any of the history between Hunter and Rachel. Fine by her. What had happened between them would stay in the past, as far as she was concerned. She didn't need to confess to the pastor that they'd once had a vibrant relationship that had turned toxic. That when she did come home, she and Hunter couldn't manage more than a few minutes—seconds, really—of stifled surface-level conversation.

But why would Greg care if she and Hunter had met? Unless...

Her stomach plummeted to her cherry-red-painted toenails. No. It couldn't be. Dread crawled across her skin even as she tried to talk herself out of the idea.

"You're my leaders for building the float with the youth group this summer. The brawn and the brains." Greg's face wreathed in a teasing smile as he glanced from Hunter to Rachel, and her world crumbled around her. She'd agreed to do one thing while home—help the youth build a float for the Independence Day parade. She'd said yes for a number of reasons. It would give her something to do while home. It would even look good on her résumé, and she needed all the help she could get to land this job. But mostly, she loved teens. All the snarky sides of them. Just like she'd been, way back when.

But she hadn't realized the opportunity would come with Hunter attached.

She was supposed to work with him? Rachel wasn't sure how to handle that. She only knew her plans remained the same: get the job she wanted and break out of this town. And just like the last time, she couldn't let Hunter McDermott stand in her way.

* * *

Hunter's ears were ringing. They felt like Kinsley had taken a pot and a pan and banged his head between them. His niece squirmed in his arms, and he realized that during Greg's revelation, he'd been squeezing her pretty tight. When he spotted his sister, Autumn, talking to someone about ten feet away, Hunter placed Kinsley on the ground. A soft pat on her diapered bum had her scooting off toward her mom. When he was satisfied she'd been captured by his sister, Hunter turned his attention back to the strange turn of events happening in front of him.

By the look of pure shock on Rachel's face, Hunter imagined Greg hadn't informed her of who the other leader would be, either. He must have assumed they didn't know each other. He couldn't be more wrong on that account.

Would Rachel run now? She was certainly good at it.

Hunter winced. When had he turned so bitter? He was morphing into his father, and he didn't like it.

He could be a gentleman and back out of helping. Rachel was the teen whisperer, not him. He was pretty much the brawn, like Greg had joked. Hunter had been asked to help with the float because he had a truck and a flatbed trailer. Two things that were needed. He'd agreed to help because he

loved the youth group. He'd spent plenty of time there as a kid. It had become a safe place for him after his mom left, and he wanted to give back to that. He still did, but how could this ever work?

"We're thankful to have the two of you helping. I honestly wasn't sure what we were going to do. But now that we have you both, crisis averted." Greg's sigh of relief told Hunter even more than his words. Hunter only knew Greg a little, but the man had been thrown into numerous roles at the church, even having to cover for the youth pastor who'd left unexpectedly.

So much for Hunter's idea of quietly disappearing. He wouldn't leave the church or the kids abandoned like that. Building the float had been the highlight of a few of his summers, too. It was tradition, and he remembered how much he'd looked forward to it.

Hunter sought Rachel's eyes, wishing he could read her like he used to be able to. Back when they'd been inseparable. When she hadn't looked at him as if her dog had just died and he was to blame. What was she thinking? "Didn't you say you were here waiting on a job?" How would she have time for something like this? How long would she actually be home?

"I am." She toyed with a gold R pendant that hung on a slim chain around her neck, her fingers a stark white. "The school is doing more interviews and then waiting for a decision from the board. It might take a month or two."

"We'll take you as long as we can have you," Greg chimed in.

That made one of them. Been there. Done that.

Greg's hand momentarily rested on Rachel's arm after his comment, and Hunter fought annoyance at the man and at himself for caring. What Rachel did or didn't do wasn't any of his business and hadn't been for a long time. But Greg was young—maybe just a few years older than Hunter—and not blind. Rachel was beautiful. Tall, with straight, light blond hair that landed inches past her shoulders and mesmerizing green eyes. He'd always been partial to the subtle smattering of freckles on her face that he knew she despised.

Her beauty hadn't been the reason Hunter had once wanted to hold on to her, but it had been a perk to look at her pretty face every day and see her smiling at him as though he made the stars shine at night. Only he hadn't been enough to keep her here.

A quick glance at the ring finger on her left hand told him she wasn't engaged or married. He assumed he would have heard if she was. Lucy Redmond—Olivia's sister—used to feed him tidbits of information about Rachel. But even Lucy's optimism couldn't overpower the messy past between Hunter and Rachel or the fact that they wanted completely opposite things.

Rachel had always had one foot out the door of this town, and his life was here. Hunter should have known to leave well enough alone when they were younger and not pursue a relationship with her, but she'd been hard to resist.

Greg had continued talking, and Hunter forced himself to concentrate on the conversation. "The search for a youth pastor probably won't wrap up until the end of July. But with you two handling the float, we only have the lock-in to cover, which I'm heading up, and then we'll hopefully have a new youth pastor starting in August or September."

The man looked pleased as punch. Hunter didn't know what to feel. For so many years, he and Rachel had avoided each other. They'd never dealt with what had happened between them. It had just been easier to sweep their past under the rug. He blamed her for so much, and he was just as sure she held him responsible for what went wrong.

And now he sounded like his father—stuck. Unable to move on.

If there was one thing Hunter wanted more than a quiet, content life of ranching, it was to not turn into his dad. He would do just about anything to avoid following in his old man's footsteps.

The three of them talked for another minute about when the float building was scheduled to start—this Wednesday. And what time—seven o'clock. Then Greg split off to catch up with someone else.

“I—” Rachel looked as though she’d witnessed a terrible car accident, a bit of green dusting her face. “I should go find my nephews and Cash and Liv. They’re probably waiting for me.”

She didn’t leave him any time to respond before she headed for the front doors of the church. Should he follow her? Make sure she was okay?

Nah. She wouldn’t welcome his intrusion.

Hunter watched her burst out into the sunlight, angst churning in his gut. The memories with Rachel flooded back, fast and furious. Before their relationship had gone so wrong, it had been good.

But what had stood between them six years ago still stretched between them now. That and a lot of hurt.

Hunter refused to turn into his father and grow resentful, holding on to the past. Which, if Rachel and Hunter were going to be working together with the youth, meant one thing. The two of them were just going to have to learn to be friends again.

Whether she wanted to be or not.

[Chapter Two](#)

Ouch. Rachel jolted awake when her elbow met the wooden side of her nephew’s fire truck bedframe. She rubbed the spot and stared up at the ceiling.

The house Rachel had grown up in—where her brother, his wife and their two boys now lived—only had three bedrooms upstairs and a small office downstairs. Her four-year-old nephew, Grayson, occupied one bedroom, and Ryder, who was just a year old, had a slightly smaller one. Cash and Olivia were in the master. There was no guest room, which meant that, with her added into the mix, Gray was sleeping on Ryder’s floor so she could have his room. He currently considered the situation “very cool” and liked “camping” every night, but that wouldn’t last forever. Certainly not for the month or two she’d be home. And while she didn’t mind sleeping in a twin bed the shape of a fire truck, she was willing to live somewhere else and give Cash, Olivia and the boys their own space back. Except that, with her limited amount of time in town plus the fact that she should be saving money, she wasn’t sure how to solve the space dilemma.

“Auntie Rach, watch out, the stampede is coming!” Grayson tore into the bedroom and jumped onto the bed with her, causing air to rush from her lungs.

“Grayson Warren Maddox, I told you not to wake her.” Olivia paused in the doorway to Rachel’s temporary room. She blew a wayward hair from her forehead, looking a little frazzled for eight o’clock in the morning.

Rachel’s sister-in-law had aged well in the years since she’d met and married Cash. She wore khaki shorts and a navy blue T-shirt, her long mocha hair pulled into a ponytail. Even without makeup, she was striking. But more than her outside beauty, she was tender and compassionate with enough snark to make her likeable. The sister Rachel had never had. When Rachel had been in high school, Olivia had been her volleyball coach. She’d made a huge impact on Rachel and mentored her at a time when she’d been missing her parents and floundering.

“Sorry, Rach. Gray needs to get dressed and I had planned to sneak in and grab a few things without waking you. But it seems our boy had a different idea.”

Rachel captured Grayson and tugged him close, holding him in a tight grip that made him squirm and giggle. “It’s okay. I was up and hungry, and I love to eat little boys for breakfast.”

He squealed and tried to get away while she smacked a kiss to his chocolate hair that still carried the sweet, fruity smell of kiddo shampoo from last night’s bath.

“Auntie Rachel, will you take me riding?” When those hazel eyes peered up at her, Rachel didn’t stand a chance of saying no. Not that she wanted to. Part of her plan for the summer was to help Liv with the kids. If she was home waiting on a job, she could at least lend a hand. She’d already finished all of the requirements needed by the State of Texas in order to be ready for the new opportunity. Which meant now she needed to occupy herself while playing the waiting game.

“Yep. Just let me get dressed. Can’t ride in our pajamas.”

Grayson's eyes lit up. "But that would be cool."

Within a half hour Rachel had eaten a bowl of cereal and downed a cup of coffee. Now she and Grayson were saddled up and headed out. He looked so happy, sitting in front of her in the saddle, mini cowboy hat on his head. Her heart just about gushed out all the love it held. She really, really adored her nephews. They were one plus in being home this summer.

The two of them meandered out on the ranch, stopping to visit with Cash and a few of the ranch hands before riding to the east edge of the property.

Rachel had forgotten about the old house that popped into view. It had been part of a ranch that had gone under decades before, and her parents had bought the land as an addition to the Circle M. She remembered a story about a skirmish between her dad and Hunter's, as they'd both wanted the property flanked by their two spreads. Her father had won the tussle, and she and Hunter had grown up on neighboring ranches.

Not that the McDermotts cared about this small slip of ranchland anymore. They were like land barons. They'd snatched up a number of smaller ranches over the years and now had a massive operation.

She directed Bonnie, the sweet mare they were riding, toward the house. A grayish hue tinted the white paint, as though the siding had given up fighting against the Texas sun years before. It looked deserted. No recent tire tracks. The grass around it was unruly and long.

Strange. Before she'd left for college, various ranch hands had rented the small house or negotiated living there as part of their pay. She didn't know what Cash did with it now.

Movement to the east caught her eye. A man on a horse crested a hill on the McDermott ranch. Too far away to tell for sure who it was, especially with the cowboy hat, but the build could definitely be Hunter's.

"Can we get down and look around?" Grayson questioned.

"Sure!"

Gray looked at her a little funny, and why wouldn't he? She'd just shown a lot of excitement for poking around an empty house. But if it would help her avoid a run-in with Hunter—if that was him—she couldn't resist.

Rachel still couldn't believe the two of them were in charge of building the float with the youth. That would have been useful information to have when Greg had asked Rachel to help. Since their conversation at church yesterday, she'd gone over and over the situation, and she couldn't see an escape route. She'd committed, and she wasn't going to back out and leave the church strapped. Besides, she wanted to work with the teens. This would be a great opportunity to show the town she'd changed—that she wasn't the same immature girl she'd once been.

Rachel wanted people to see her as who she'd become. Not the queen of bad decisions. A crown she'd once had the monopoly on.

She and Hunter would just have to function around each other. If they limited their interactions to Wednesday nights and the occasional sighting at church, Rachel would be out of here and on to her new life in no time.

Bonnie meandered to a stop on the west side of the house, and Rachel and Grayson slipped down from the saddle. Her nephew was more at home riding than most adults she knew. Definitely her brother's child. When they'd been kids, Cash had always been out working with the horses, doing anything mechanical, helping move cattle and bumming around the ranch with Dad, even at a young age. The memory coaxed a smile. She was thankful the ache of missing her parents had lessened over the years, though it always remained with her.

What she wouldn't give to be able to go back for one day and tell them how much she loved them.

Gray had already taken off around the front of the house, so Rachel secured Bonnie to the hitching post and trotted after him. The kid only had one speed—fast.

“Can we go inside? Maybe we’ll find a snake!” He’d already climbed the front steps and now stood on the small wooden porch. He tossed his hat on the stair railing, leaving a thick head of mussed brown hair visible. “Or a black widow spider. Or a tarantula.” His excitement increased with each suggestion, while Rachel’s mind screamed, *Turn around. Fast.*

She peeked through the front window. Papers, a turned-over chair, clothes and some other random items littered the floor. On the front porch, an abandoned wooden swing hung by only one chain. The other side scraped eerily against the floorboards in the slight breeze.

No one lived here. Not at the moment.

“We can try, bud, but I would assume it’s locked.” Rachel attempted to turn the knob, but it didn’t twist. Mostly to prove to Grayson that she’d tried, she shoved on the door with the palm of her hand. Amazingly, it eased open. The latch must have been broken. She pushed the door open wider, and it creaked and groaned as though arthritis crippled its hinges.

Before going inside, she gave the porch a good hard stomp, just in case any critters did live inside. Ignoring the creepy feeling that a spider was about to descend on her head, she took a tentative step inside. It smelled...musty. But daylight streamed in through the windows, illuminating a basic, but surprisingly roomy space. A small bedroom was visible through an open door to the right, and the kitchen area held a few cabinets and an avocado-green stove. An older fridge—the kind that would probably go for megabucks as vintage on eBay—had the doors propped open. Thankfully the contents had been cleaned out before it had been left unplugged.

“Whoa.” Grayson had followed her inside and now stood next to her, thumbs hooked through his belt loops as he studied the room. “This could be my fort. I’d pretend the bad guys were coming.” His fingers formed guns as he faced the door. “I’d have everything ready. They wouldn’t stand a chance against me.”

Just like Grayson to see the possibilities instead of the obstacles. At four years old—soon to be five—he had the sweetest optimism about life. Rachel would like to take a scoop of it with her wherever she went. She ran a hand through his soft hair. “Totally, buddy. You’d have the fastest guns, for sure.”

Grayson walked the open stretch of floor, boots echoing against the wood. He stopped at the end of the room, head tilted in concentration. “Think Dad would let me move out here?”

She managed to stem the laughter bubbling in her throat. “I don’t know about that, Gray.”

Though she could understand his interest. The place did have a certain charm—if she looked past the mess that had been left behind. For a family, it would be tiny. But for one or two people? Cozy. Quiet.

If she could get this place cleaned up, maybe *she* could move out here for the next month or two. She could give Olivia, Cash and the boys their house back while still being around to help and spend time with them. Rachel pressed the pause button on her rampant thoughts. The idea was crazy. The house might not be falling to pieces, but it would take too long if she attempted it on her own. Rachel could admit it was as tempting to her as Grayson’s fort was to him, though.

“Auntie Rachel, can I go outside?” Grayson had already zipped through the small bathroom and bedroom and must have gotten bored with the space.

Liv let Grayson play outdoors by himself for little bits of time, so Rachel thought the same rule could apply here. “If you stay within five steps of the house.”

“Five giant steps?”

With his little legs? “Deal.”

“Front and back?”

“Just front. That way I can keep an eye on you through the windows.”

His nose wrinkled as if to say he didn’t need that kind of supervision, but then he scampered outside.

She moved into the bedroom, watching through the old, white-wood-framed glass window as Grayson scooted down the porch steps, and then, true to form, counted out five long strides from the house. When he reached the limit, he bent down, grabbed a stick and began drawing in the dirt.

Rachel wandered to the east bedroom window and scanned the horizon. No more sign of the rider who had been there minutes before.

If it had been Hunter, he was gone now. Relief rushed in, cool and sweet.

Sometimes she looked back on what had happened with Hunter and wondered how it had all gone so wrong. How they'd switched from best friends to not speaking at all.

Most people didn't know that Hunter had gotten it into his head to propose to her back then. She hadn't even told her brother, simply because Rachel had known it couldn't happen. Getting married at such a young age might have worked out for Hunter. He'd known what he wanted and that it was here. He was a rancher. It had always been this town, this life, for him.

But Cash had given up a lot for her, and she'd been working on maturing at the time. That hadn't included eloping and throwing away a volleyball scholarship. Even for Hunter.

To say the least, he hadn't understood.

Their relationship—even their friendship—had been crushed.

Something skittered across the wood floor and Rachel screamed. An old brown chair had been left behind in the corner of the room, and she ran for it, jumping up. It wobbled under her weight but thankfully held. Screeches continued to slip out of her as the mouse paused to stare her down, then ran for the edge of the room.

She shivered as it disappeared beneath some warped trim. *Eek*, that thing had freaked her out. Her heart stampeded, and she sucked in a calming breath, thankful no one was around to see her silly antics over such a tiny creature.

"What are you doing?" Hunter leaned against the bedroom doorframe, arms crossed. Looking casual. Amused.

Her eyes momentarily closed. So it had been him she'd seen. He must have left his hat somewhere, because his hair looked as though a hand had scrubbed through the short, dark blond locks only seconds before.

Stinky, stink, stink. How long had he been standing there? She looked down at the chair under her boots, then back to him, contemplating asking, *God, why? Why Hunter? Why now?*

"Nothing."

"Just standing on a chair in the corner of a deserted house?"

"Yep." Rachel didn't have to explain anything to Hunter. For all he knew, she'd been looking at something on the ceiling. Or examining a crack in the wall. Or checking out her ability to fly if she jumped from the chair.

The real question was, what was he doing here?

He motioned to the floor. "Tell me that wasn't a reaction to the cute baby mouse that just went through here."

Rats. He'd witnessed her dramatics.

"What happened to the country girl I knew? The one who could ride as fast as the boys. Wasn't afraid of snakes. Got dirtier faster than anyone else."

"Most of that was true, but I faked the part about snakes. I was afraid of them. Just didn't want to admit it. If I had, you would have tormented me with them."

He laughed, the lines on his face softening. "Well played." He nodded toward her strange standing place. "Don't suppose you want any help getting out of here." His dimples flashed. "You know, so that mean, scary mouse doesn't get you."

"I'm fine." The mouse was long gone. Wasn't it? Either way, Rachel wasn't going to do anything to prolong being in Hunter's presence. Even if that creature came back out. Ran across her boot. Gave her the heebie-jeebies again.

She could handle a little rodent. Just not the man looking at her with far too much amusement. Besides, with all of the noise they were making, the mouse would be miles away. Rachel only wished Hunter would follow suit.

* * *

“Don’t you have a ranch to run?” Rachel huffed loudly enough to blow the walls of the house down like the big bad wolf in the three little pigs story.

Hunter tried to stem the curve of his mouth, but it wasn’t working. He’d forgotten how much fun it was to rile up Rachel. “Trying to get rid of me?”

Her head tilted, ponytail bouncing with the movement. “Am I that obvious? Because I’m trying to be.”

Despite claiming she didn’t want help, she was still standing on the chair. He might be enjoying her predicament and annoyance with him just a bit too much. It had been a few years since he’d gotten any emotional response from her, and he kind of liked knowing he still affected her, even if it meant she wanted to smack him.

“All right, princess.” The name earned a scowl as he approached her chair/throne and offered her a hand. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Her body language screamed *get lost* and *don’t touch* in one easy-to-read display. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you.”

“I told you, I’m fine.” She made a shooin’ motion. “Just go.”

“Now, Rach. I’m not so much of a jerk that I’m going to let you get mauled by a mouse.” Her squeak of indignation and the fire in her eyes told him how she felt about that comment. “Come on.” He grew serious and dropped the teasing act, re-offering his hand. “Let’s go.”

“No, thank you.”

He’d also forgotten just how stubborn she was. When they’d been younger and first started hanging out, it had taken Hunter some time to prove she could trust him. Rachel’d been the queen of building walls and defending them. Eventually he’d gotten through. And once he had, it had been worth it.

But she’d had years to rebuild. Which meant they could be here all day. And, honestly, he just didn’t have time for that. Despite what she thought of him, he’d heard her scream when the mouse had spooked her, and he wasn’t going to just leave her stranded.

Before he could analyze how mad she’d be, Hunter bent and scooped her over his right shoulder.

She screeched and whacked him on the back, where the upper half of her body hung. Wiggled trying to break free. He strode through the bedroom and living room, one arm looped around her legs so she didn’t fall to the floor with all of her squirming.

“What are you doing? Put me down, you big ogre.”

His chest shook with quiet laughter as he exited through the front door. Rachel’s nephew Grayson played nearby, destroying an anthill with a stick. He only glanced up for a second—not the least bit concerned about the racket his aunt was making or the fact that she was slung over Hunter’s shoulder—and quickly went back to his digging and investigating.

Hunter deposited Rachel on the front porch. “This far enough or do you need me to go farther?” He adopted a serious face and nodded toward the field. “But who knows what-all is out there. Could be a spider or, even worse, a crow—they make scary noises. I’ve heard stories about them swooping down and snatching up small children. You’re a skinny thing. Can’t be too careful.”

This time her hit landed on his arm. He chuckled, which, judging by the way her face had turned as menacing as a thunderstorm, was only making her more upset.

“Are you done making fun of me yet? I don’t appreciate you taking the liberty to cart me around like a sack of feed.” She growled the last bit, crossing her arms over a simple white T-shirt that made renewed laughter catch in his throat. He’d been too amused and distracted by her antics inside to

notice what she was wearing. Most often when she came home to visit and he caught a glimpse of her, she was dressed up for church. Always looking so put together. Usually in heels, too. Not cowboy boots and faded jeans and a fitted white T-shirt. The simple outfit almost knocked him over.

Though, right now he'd better concentrate on her not kicking him in the shin. She looked mad enough.

"I think I'm done, though I reserve the right to make fun of you about this again in the future. What are you two doing out here, anyway?"

He'd been out checking for signs of coyotes when he'd spotted Rachel and her nephew. He'd stopped to talk to her because he thought they needed to get some things worked out. Like, was she still planning to help the youth build the float? If not, he'd need to find someone else. Hunter was happy to help with the float building, but he didn't feel qualified to be the only one in charge of a group of teens.

"Grayson wanted to explore." Rachel stared straight forward after answering him, her jaw set in that stubborn look she did so well.

"Did you back out of helping with the youth?"

Her cheeks pinkened, highlighting her freckles. "No. I didn't."

"So you're committing?"

Her gaze snapped to him. Oops. Bad choice of words.

When she finally nodded, his worry decreased. "That's good. They need someone like you in their lives."

At that, her demeanor softened a bit. "Did you back out?"

"Nope. Wouldn't want you to lose out on the delight of working with me."

That earned him an eye roll and a shaking head. Just like the old Rachel.

He nodded over to Grayson, who was now inspecting under the front porch as though he might find a treasure. "Ran into Grayson on my way in and he told me he was planning to move out here."

Cute kid. Always dressed like a miniature cowboy, that one. Boots. Jeans. T-shirt. Coupled with scrawny arms, a mop of brown hair and eyes that brimmed with curiosity.

"I wish."

"What's that mean?"

Rachel peered through the front window before releasing an audible sigh. "Cash's house is so crowded with me added in. Grayson was asking if this could be his fort, and I was thinking the same thing. That I want to move out here."

"With the mouse?"

Was that a halfway smile claiming her mouth? Hunter should call the *Fredericksburg Standard*. News like that could make the front page.

A visible shudder followed. "Definitely not with the mouse."

"You know, you can get rid of mice. The place didn't look too bad when I was in there. Seemed mostly cosmetic. Cleaning. Paint. Looked like someone had the law on their tail and left half their belongings. Granted, you were screaming like someone was after you, so I didn't get a great look."

"I could never do it on my own, and I'm not asking Cash. He has enough to do."

"I would help you." The words were out of his mouth before he had time to think, but once they registered, he decided the idea wasn't so crazy. If he was going to follow through with the two of them getting along and putting the past behind them, he might as well jump in with both feet.

Curiosity and concern mingled in the depths of her distractingly beautiful green eyes. Maybe even a bit of fear. "Why?"

"Why not?"

It was easier to answer that way than to tell her the truth. *I don't want to turn into my father* seemed like a strange answer. There was one thing he'd never seen his dad and mom do—make amends. Forgive. Move on. Therefore, that's exactly what Hunter planned to accomplish.

And this way, when Rachel did her next disappearing act for the job she wanted and came back to visit her family, she and Hunter would be able to get along. Wish each other well.

She studied the toes of her camel-colored boots as though they held the answer to all of the world's problems. "It was nice of you to offer, but I can't accept."

Couldn't? Or wouldn't? He could pretty easily guess the answer to that. Her response didn't surprise him. She wasn't the type to welcome his offer—or anyone's for that matter—with open arms. Nope. Rachel had always had a bit of an edge to her, and that was putting it nicely. The woman had more spunk in her pinkie finger than most people had in their whole body. It had been one of the things he'd liked about her back then. Still did.

"We need to get back." Rachel shut the front door of the house. She grabbed the small cowboy hat propped on the stair railing and tromped down the steps, heading for their horse and calling Grayson at the same time.

After a few seconds of complaining from the boy, Rachel and Grayson mounted up. They took off with quick waves in his direction.

She was sure in an all-fired hurry to get out of here. Away from him. Not that he blamed her. He'd been a jerk when they were younger. He'd asked her to stay when he shouldn't have.

Some people just weren't built for this life.

Hunter had learned that lesson too well. A painful brand had been burned into him because of his mother's unhappiness. She'd detested ranching and small-town living. Yet Dad had convinced her it would grow on her one day. He'd pursued her until she'd agreed to marry him and live on the ranch. Hunter had heard the beginning of their story many times.

But the middle and end had never improved. In all of his childhood memories, his mom had been sad. Lethargic. Broken. When he was nine, she'd given up pretending and left them. Moved to Dallas.

After, Dad had sunk further and further out of reach. It wasn't that they didn't see each other. It was that they didn't really talk about anything besides ranching. His sister, Autumn, had been his saving grace. Three years older, she'd taken to mothering him.

Hunter wouldn't copy his father's mistakes again. He'd been selfish asking Rachel to stay and marry him. She'd only been eighteen. He'd been twenty. Hunter had watched his mom live a life she didn't want. He'd witnessed her unhappiness. He'd known better than to ask Rachel to do the same, yet he'd been grasping at straws to keep her in his life.

And, in the process, he'd lost her completely.

Suggesting they get married had been impetuous of him, and when Rachel had said she loved him but she couldn't, he'd reacted so badly. Out of hurt, he'd pushed her away.

Not a shining moment for him.

But it was time to turn all of that around. Hunter had been at a loss about how to prove to Rachel that they could get along again. She'd built so many walls between them over time—and he'd only been too happy to help her hold them steady—that he wasn't sure where to begin.

But now that he knew about the house, she'd given him the perfect way to start.

He only hoped it wouldn't backfire on him.

[Chapter Three](#)

Rachel surveyed the small ranch house from the doorway, frustration zinging along her spine. It was Wednesday, and she and Grayson had gone out for another ride. He'd been antsy after it rained all day Tuesday, and he'd wanted to visit the house again—which he'd started referring to as his fort. But since they'd been out on Monday, someone had been here. Supplies were sitting just inside the door, paint cans included. The mountain of trash was gone.

All fingers pointed to Hunter, since no one else even knew what she'd been thinking. What part of *no* didn't he understand? She did not appreciate his intruding in her life like this.

Rachel slipped her cell phone from her pocket, hoped the reception would work and called her friend Val. The two of them had been best friends since junior high, and the fact that Val still lived in Fredericksburg was, for Rachel, a definite plus in being home. They'd kept up their friendship over the years—one of the only people Rachel could claim that about. Val had always been levelheaded back when Rachel had been anything but. Now she hoped the two of them were on a more similar plane. Except, at the moment, *level* was not a feeling Rachel was experiencing.

"Hey," Val's voice sounded in her ear. "Connor is eating mac and cheese, which means I'll probably have to go in a sec when he puts a piece of it up his nose even though I've tried to teach him not to do that a million times."

"Okay." Not for the first time, Rachel thought what a strange thing motherhood was. "You are never going to believe what Hunter did."

"Ooh, what?"

She explained about finding the deserted old ranch house, running into Hunter and the conversation that had ensued. "And now he's started fixing it up after I told him no. I didn't even know he'd been out here and a bunch of stuff got done."

"Huh." Prolonged silence came from Val's side of the conversation. "That's...horrible?"

"It is horrible! I don't want him involved in my life."

"Technically he's not involved. You weren't even there when he did anything."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?"

A stifled cough-laugh combination answered her. "I mean, how could he just help you like that when you didn't even give him permission?"

"Your sarcasm is impressive."

"Thank you. I learned it from you. So, do you want my old-married-lady advice?"

"You've been married two years, so I don't think that qualifies you as headed out for pasture yet, but sure." Rachel's mouth curved despite her annoyance with Hunter. "Hit me with it."

"Let him help. You're out of space at the house. I'd offer to let you stay here—"

"You guys don't have room for me, either."

"That's why I'm telling you to accept his offer. At some point, you need to let go of what happened between the two of you. This is the perfect opportunity."

"No."

"Just...no? That's all you've got?"

"Yep." Rachel might be using toddler logic right now, but she didn't care to adjust her maturity level. She didn't have to explain her feelings, did she? How could she, when she didn't even understand them herself? "Why would he do this?"

"Maybe he likes you." Val stretched out the phrase, sounding as though she was imitating one of the second-grade students she taught.

"Ha." Rachel swallowed, mouth suddenly devoid of moisture. "That's not funny."

Laughter floated into her ear, then stopped abruptly. "Oh, no." Resignation laced Val's tone. "There went the mac and cheese. Gotta go."

They disconnected and Rachel glanced at the pile of supplies. What was Hunter thinking? Could Val's joking insinuation be true? Was Hunter trying to...? No way. He couldn't have feelings for her. Could he? He had talked to her more in the last few days than he had in years. *Was* he trying to rekindle things? It made no sense, especially since he always seemed annoyed or offended by her presence. At least, he had before this visit home.

Rachel didn't know what to think. It couldn't be. But why else would he do something like this?

It wasn't like he hadn't gotten a crazy idea regarding them before. His suggestion they get married had been completely unexpected.

Back in high school, Rachel had made some stupid decisions about guys. She'd dated one she would rather forget and had done a number of things she regretted during her teenage years.

In the last part of her senior year of school, when she and Hunter had first started hanging out, she'd been wary of making another mistake. Another stupid decision about another guy. But she'd quickly noticed the differences in Hunter. He'd been genuine. Always respectful. He'd made her laugh. He was one of the few people she'd talked to about her parents and he'd talked to her about his mom.

They'd hung out a long time before they'd even so much as held hands. Their first kiss had been...heart pounding. They'd been on a walk. He'd been teasing her about something, and the next thing she knew, he'd stopped, buried his hands in her hair and kissed her. Kissed her as though she was oxygen and he needed to breathe. After, he'd backed away. His grin slow. Easy. "I knew it." Then he'd grabbed her hand and kept walking while she stumbled to find coherent thought again.

She'd fallen for him. Hard.

Falling for him had been the easy part. But even back then, they'd known she was moving for school. The knowledge had hung over them like a storm cloud that followed their every step. At first it hadn't been menacing—just something to deal with in the future. But as the time for her to leave had neared, the cloud had changed from might-rain-sometime into a dark, severe-weather thunderstorm.

They'd avoided talking much about her looming departure for college, neither of them knowing what to do about it.

The week before she'd been set to move, they'd been sitting on the porch swing at his dad's house, concern over the future stealing their words, when Hunter had squeezed her hand. "Don't go," he'd said. Her head had snapped in his direction. "Stay. I know people will say we're young, but I don't want to do life without you. Marry me." At first, his eyes had flashed with surprise at his words, but then he'd leaned toward her as if the idea had gained momentum. "We should get married. We could elope."

Rachel remembered precisely how she'd felt. Like a car had rammed into her. She'd loved Hunter, but had known instantly that she couldn't. As much as the thought of leaving him had hurt and refusing him had felt like the hardest thing she'd ever do, she'd been certain she had to follow through with her plans.

Her stomach had tied itself into thousands of knots. She'd tried to tell him how much she cared about him...but that she couldn't stay. Couldn't marry him. Not at eighteen.

In the middle of her explanation, he'd shut down. His eyes had hardened. And then he'd told her to go. That if she didn't feel the same way about him as he did about her, she might as well leave immediately. In the next week, before she'd left, they hadn't even seen each other. It had been so painful.

She couldn't do that again. Rachel didn't know what Hunter was thinking, but she had to talk to him. They were going to be working together with the youth. They'd be seeing enough of each other that she had to make sure she was clear with him about her future plans and that nothing could happen between them. They couldn't go back down the road they'd once traveled.

It was Wednesday. Tonight was the first night of working on the float with the teens. She'd head over early and have a conversation with him.

She had to. Because, despite having moved on from their younger years, she knew she couldn't survive that experience twice.

* * *

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Autumn was perched on the desk in the barn office/storage area while Hunter rummaged through the bins the church had given him for float decorating.

When he glanced up, her pointed look told him she expected an answer. His sister packed a lot of punch for five foot two. But despite her petite size, she'd always played and fought just as hard as the boys.

“Yes, I know what I’m doing.” He set aside two bins. “Just because you’re older than me doesn’t mean you’re wiser.”

“You are correct.” She twisted her light brown hair over one shoulder. “Age doesn’t matter, but I am wiser.”

He didn’t bother answering that sassy comment.

“You do remember what happened the last time? I mean, I think Rachel’s great and all, but you were a mess when she left.”

He didn’t need the reminder. “I wasn’t a mess.” He might have been a small version of that word. “But that’s not going to happen again. This is about being a friend. What I should have been to her in the first place before I let stupidity cloud my judgment. She needed someone to be there for her, and back then I made it about me and what I wanted. She deserves to be treated well, and while I didn’t accomplish that the last time, I am going to this time.”

“So, you’re just going to help her with this house whether she wants it or not?”

“Pretty much.”

“And you’re trying to prove...”

“That I’m not Dad.” The words slipped out, and Hunter almost rolled his eyes. How did Autumn always pull information out of him he didn’t plan to give?

Her eyebrows stitched together. “Hunter, you’re nothing like Dad. You work hard, so I guess you have that in common, but that’s about it.”

Except for the part where he’d asked Rachel to stay and he shouldn’t have. And the next part, where he’d been a jerk and reacted badly when she’d said no. Autumn didn’t understand because she and her husband Calvin had met when they were older. Dating...marriage...it had all just fallen into place for them without any stupid decisions to atone for.

“Think about it this way. If you knew you couldn’t have Calvin as anything more than a friend, wouldn’t you want that? And if you’d hurt him, wouldn’t you want to rectify that?”

Autumn studied him. Finally, she nodded, but her brow remained pinched. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

He tapped a fist on his chest. “I’m practically a superhero with all of these muscles.”

She groaned in response, then stood and rubbed a hand over her growing belly. His nephew was coming in about three months, and Hunter was more than ready. It had been a rough pregnancy, and Autumn had been sick for much of it.

She might be his older sister, but he still felt protective of her. Which meant he understood her concern about him. But she was just going to have to trust him. Hunter had prayed over this decision, and he felt peace about it. Moving on and regaining a friendship with Rachel was the right thing to do.

Autumn stretched her arms over her head, accompanying that with a huge yawn. “I’m hungry.”

“What’s new? It’s been an hour since you last ate.”

“Jerk.” Humor puckered the skin around her eyes. “I’ll see you later.”

She let herself out through the office door, and a few seconds later he heard her car start. Hunter grabbed the extralarge gray tote filled with float-building supplies and strode toward the open end of the barn where the flatbed trailer waited.

Rachel stood just inside the large sliding doors. She looked fighting mad. Gorgeous—no surprise there—but not happy. He changed course, walking in her direction.

Was she just here early for the first night with the youth? Or had she found out he’d been at the house? Based on her expression, he’d say the latter. Hunter had hoped helping make the place livable for her would work in his favor, but he was starting to doubt his plan.

Rachel wore a green sleeveless shirt with pressed flowered shorts. Coupled with sandals that daintily looped around her ankles, she looked perfectly put together, yet she still had that edge. The one that said, *I don’t belong in this Podunk town. I’m meant for more and don’t you forget it.*

Though he read her message loud and clear, it didn't stop him from appreciating the sight. He'd thought jeans, a T-shirt and boots might do him in the other day, but as it turned out, it didn't matter what she wore.

Caused a bit of trouble, that. He wasn't supposed to be noticing how she looked—though, really, it would be impossible for him not to. He was supposed to be renewing their friendship. And he wasn't off to a great start by the look of it.

He set the large tote on the ground by their feet. "Hey, you're here early."

"I need to talk to you before the kids arrive."

"About the float?" He could only hope.

"No."

Ah. So she'd found the stuff.

"I assume it was you who started working on the house?"

He didn't have anything to hide. "I did."

"I wasn't even serious about it. It was just a passing thought. Why would you do something like that?" Her breath hissed out. "It doesn't even make sense. I'm only going to be here for a month or two."

"What's Cash planning to do with the house?"

"I don't know. I asked Olivia what happened with it. She said the last renter trashed it, and Cash hasn't had time to deal with it since."

"So after you live there for the summer, he can rent it out again. If none of his ranch hands want to lease it, one of ours might. We're not talking about remodeling the place. Just cleaning it up and making it livable so you can stay there while you're home."

Silence reigned. Rachel opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally, she lifted one freckled shoulder. "I guess that makes sense." Just that movement made his mouth go dry. Pesky attraction. At least he'd had a lot of practice shoving it down and ignoring it over the years.

"But why are you helping me?" Her forehead crinkled. "Why would you do that? I don't know if you've forgotten, but you and I aren't on the best of terms. It makes no sense. Unless..." She might as well spit it out since he didn't have any idea what she was trying to say. "Hunter..." Her voice lowered as though someone was hiding around the corner and might overhear them. "You're not trying to restart anything between us, are you?"

What? She thought he was...oh, man. He hadn't even considered that working on the house would make it look like he wanted something more with Rachel. Partly because the idea hadn't even crossed his mind. But, of course, she couldn't read his thoughts.

"We can't." Her lips pressed together. "I can't."

He agreed with her. He couldn't, either. "I'm not trying to start anything between us. I was just sick of—" he raised his hands "—fighting. Not being able to be around each other. Figured it was time to move on. I knew you could use a hand, and this is what friends do."

"So you're not..."

"Nope."

"Oh, good." Distress dropped from her frame, her sigh audible. And a little bit offensive. Did she have to be *so* relieved about it?

Whatever. It didn't matter. Hunter wasn't on the hunt for a wife, anyway. What had happened with his mom and then Rachel had tainted that idea for him. He just wanted a quiet life on the ranch. No drama. No women who didn't want to be there. If he found someone, that would be great, but he wasn't going to do backflips to make it happen. He could be content on his own.

"I'm not trying to pursue anything more than friendship with you, so you can relax. I wouldn't do that to you." Or to himself. "I would never ask you to stay again, Rach. I know you don't belong here." Silence swirled between them, the past rearing up with ugly memories. "Promise. You can trust me."

Her pained glance told him she wasn't so sure about that.

“Will it put you at ease if I’m not the only one working on the house? Because Brennon called and said he and Val want to pitch in. They’re planning to come out Saturday.”

“What?” Exasperation laced the word. “When did you talk to them?”

“Just a bit ago. Why?”

Sounded like she muttered *traitor*. “What is up with all of you? I didn’t even ask for help. This is crazy.”

“Are you really surprised? Don’t you remember what it’s like living in a small town? This is how it is. When someone needs something, everyone pitches in. That’s the deal. You’ll just have to adjust to the idea.”

“And what if I don’t want to?”

Hunter knew the answer to this question. His life had taught him this truth numerous times. “You can’t always get what you want.”

Chapter Four

Somewhere along the way, her plan had backfired. Go over there and tell Hunter to back off. Rachel pictured herself doing that “go to the mattresses” punching move like Meg Ryan in *You’ve Got Mail*, fists jabbing into thin air. And then failing miserably—also just like the character in the movie.

Of course she wasn’t going to let her friends work on the house without pulling her own weight, which meant she’d be spending even more time with Hunter. Rachel had definitely lost the battle to avoid him while home. He’d said he didn’t want anything more than friendship with her—and she believed him—but she still didn’t relish being in his presence. Even the friendship he wanted felt too far out of reach for them. Their bridge had washed out years before, and it was too late to rebuild.

Get used to having people intrude in your life, he’d told her.

Well, she didn’t plan to. Rachel wasn’t about to let her guard down and have him and a whole town rushing in.

Was. Not.

Liv had agreed that Rachel staying at the house was a great idea. Which meant now she just needed to broach the subject with her brother.

They’d just finished dinner, and Grayson had run off to play.

Olivia collected Ryder from his high chair. “I’m going to change his diaper.” She shot Rachel a look, as if to say, *do it, already*, then headed up the stairs.

Fine. “Cash, what are you planning to do with the little ranch house?”

Her brother finished a long swig of milk. “Not sure. T.J. took off about three months ago. He quit without notice and made a mess of the place. I haven’t had the time or energy to deal with it.” His back pressed into his chair. “I might just let it sit there. Not a real fan of being a landlord, anyway.”

“What if someone got it back in functioning order for you? And then lived there for a little bit and then you could rent it out again?”

His forehead creased. And why wouldn’t it? She was talking in circles.

“I want to live there while I’m home. It will give you guys your house back—”

“This is your house, too, you know.”

“Technically it’s yours.” When they’d settled things with their parents’ will, Cash had bought out her portion of the house. She hadn’t wanted it.

“This will always be your home. You are always welcome.”

The strangest prick of emotion touched her eyes. “Okay.” She heard him. But no matter how many times he said it, she would always feel like a leaf scraping along the pavement in a gust of wind. Rachel didn’t really belong anywhere.

When she moved to Houston, maybe she’d settle in. Put down roots.

“If I can stay at the house, I’ll be close by. My friends are going to help me get it cleaned up and functioning, and then when I leave, you can rent it out again. If you want to. Hunter even

mentioned that one of his ranch hands might want to rent it if you'd rather not deal with knowing the tenant personally."

"I don't know." Cash pushed his plate forward and propped his arms on the table. "I just don't know how safe that would be for you."

She laughed.

He scowled.

"Oh, you were serious? I thought you were kidding around, because it's in the middle of two ranches where I know both families. The only visitors would be crickets and frogs." And hopefully not mice.

Her brother did remember she'd been living on her own for the last six years, right? In a city much bigger than this one. A bit of that old friction radiated between them. Rachel had been excellent at pushing Cash's buttons in high school. Admittedly, she'd enjoyed every minute far more than she should have. But she really didn't want to fight with him now. She wasn't that girl anymore. Or, at least, she made a serious effort not to be.

Liv came back downstairs with Ryder on her hip and paused at the edge of the table, glancing between Cash and Rachel. "It's weird how Rachel rarely comes home to visit. Here she has all of this tension waiting right here for her and she doesn't even take advantage."

Rachel couldn't help it. She laughed, earning another frown from her brother.

Ryder bounced in Olivia's arms and Rachel reached for him. He came right to her, and she lifted him in the air, earning a flash of baby teeth, a sloppy grin and a bit of drool. When she settled him on her lap, he grabbed the R pendant she wore on a simple gold necklace and gave it a firm tug. Thankfully the chain withstood his efforts.

Grayson might be her favorite nephew for adventuring, but Ryder was the best at snuggles. His hair was a few shades lighter than Gray's. Almost had an auburn shade to it. No one knew where that had come from. His cheeks were squishable, and the boy was as solid as a summer day was long. Liv talked about percentiles and other momish mumbo-jumbo, but Rachel just knew her nephew was built like a one-year-old linebacker.

Olivia dropped into the chair next to Cash. "Rachel and I talked about the house earlier today, and I think it's not such a crazy idea. In fact, I think it's a good one. How many times have we said we need to get it cleaned up, even if we don't decide to rent it out again? You don't have the time. Rachel and her friends will have it done in a few days. We could even use it as a guesthouse if you don't want to rent it. My parents could stay there when they visit. And Rachel would have a place to crash when she comes back to see us."

Every time Rachel thought she couldn't love Olivia more, she was proven wrong.

"Rachel staying there makes perfect sense," Liv continued. "I'm surprised we didn't think of it earlier."

Cash looked part contemplative, part concerned. "I don't know why she'd want to live in that hunk of a house, anyway. It's as big as a cracker. And old." And Rachel didn't know why her brother was talking about her as if she wasn't in the room.

"And quiet. And quaint." Liv sat up straighter in her chair. "Maybe I want to move out there."

"Ha." Cash's eyes narrowed. "Not funny."

She stacked their empty dinner dishes. "Who says I'm joking?"

A shaking head-grin combination came from Cash. "You'd miss me, city girl."

Before Liv could retort—and Rachel had the utmost confidence her sister-in-law would have had a good one—Cash turned serious again. "I don't know that it's a good idea for you to be out there by yourself, Rach. Something could happen."

"And now this sounds like when Rachel was in high school." Liv jumped in, compassion evident despite the disagreement. "She's twenty-four. Not seventeen. Besides that, by the end of the summer she'll likely be living in Houston by herself." If anyone could talk her stubborn brother into something,

it would be Liv. “Ryder cries at night, and even though he’s going back to sleep, he’s waking up Grayson who’s crawling into bed with us. I, for one, am exhausted. I’d like to sleep without a foot in my mouth.” Olivia scooted closer to Cash, placed her elbows on the table and propped her head in her hands. “Do you see this face? This is a tired face.”

In answer, Cash leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her lips. “It’s a beautiful face.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

While Rachel appreciated Liv having her back, she wasn’t sure how much PDA she could handle. The house might not be worth it. “I like to think I’ve evolved into a mature version of myself, but you two are kind of grossing me out right now. Somehow you are just as annoyingly sappy as you were when you first got married.”

They laughed.

Rachel glanced at the time on her cell, which was lying on the table. She’d told Hunter she would meet him at the house tonight so they could start working, assuming her brother wouldn’t have any issue with it. She should have known better. The two of them had always been like rams, crashing into the other until one of them won. Though they had gotten better over the years since she’d been gone. Rachel appreciated her brother far more now than she had when she’d been a teen. She’d pushed and clawed at him in high school, but he’d never backed away from her. Even at her snarky teenage best.

She could do the house without his agreement; she knew that. He’d come around eventually. But it wasn’t about permission. It was about getting along. She liked the idea a whole lot better without her brother being upset. They’d been down that road one too many times before, and she had no desire to repeat history.

Which was why, if he really didn’t want her to live in the little house, she wouldn’t.

“Well?” The toe of Rachel’s flip-flop tapped under the table, her gaze steady on Cash. “What are you thinking?”

His hands rubbed his eyes as he leaned back in the chair. “Are you actually waiting to hear my opinion?”

Ryder shifted on Rachel’s lap, as though he wanted to get down. “I’m a docile version of my old self. Sweet. Compliant.”

Cash snorted as she deposited Ryder on the floor, and he toddled toward the couches and toy bin. He’d only recently started walking, and every few steps he’d tumble to the floor and crawl a little before pulling himself back up on a piece of furniture.

An accusing look flashed from Cash to Rachel and Liv, though it was tempered with amusement. “If I even attempt to say no, the two of you will conspire and do it, anyway.”

Liv’s hand landed on her sternum. “Rachel and me, scheme? That would never happen.” She shot a grin in Rachel’s direction. “Plus, you heard Rach. She’s the picture of innocence these days.”

In the past, her name and *scheme* in the same sentence would have offended her, even though it likely would have been true. But now Rachel could embrace the humor instead of the embarrassment.

“I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you,” Cash continued. “I know you can make your own decisions and take care of yourself. It’s just having you here makes me think you’re my responsibility again.”

“We’ve been over this.” He’d struggled so much with protecting her after their parents passed away. Over feeling responsible for things that weren’t in his control. “God’s got me covered. I’ve always been in His hands.” And it was true. Rachel didn’t always understand the way God answered prayers, but she did know what-ifs got a person nowhere. “Something could just as easily happen to me in Houston as it could here. There are no guarantees.”

“Well, that’s not helping anything.” A reluctant tilt claimed one side of his mouth. “At least promise me you’re going to fix the broken latch and put the best lock known to man on there. In fact, I’ll get the replacement lock. I’ll spring for whatever supplies are needed to get it functioning again. Only makes sense if we’re going to benefit from your work.”

She whooped and ran over, hugging him.

“Who did you say was going to help you?”

The feeling of excitement plummeted as she straightened. “Val and Brennon on Saturday, and...Hunter.”

“He’s a good kid.”

The *kid* part made her mouth lift. Hunter was eight years younger than Cash.

Her brother’s head cocked to the side. “Didn’t the two of you—”

“Yep. We did. But that was then. Nothing to do with now.”

Cash raised palms in defense. “Okay. Just...be careful.” He began to drone on about safety with power tools and being sure to ask Hunter about the sink, because it was leaking. And how they should wear masks when they painted. But Rachel was already light-years ahead of him.

They might have slightly different takes on his warning, but Cash didn’t have to tell her to be careful twice. Because that’s exactly what she planned to do.

* * *

Hunter left the door of the house open while he worked. The summer heat clung to him, and the light breeze brought in much-needed relief. He swiped the back of his arm across his forehead. Sweat changed places and he winced. Good thing he wasn’t trying to impress Rachel this time around. He was pretty sure he looked a mess. He’d come straight from the ranch, only stopping to nuke two of those sorry excuses for frozen burritos for dinner. He’d wolfed them down in his truck on the drive over, then wished he’d have made three.

He heard Rachel’s vehicle approach and turn off. A few seconds later, her footsteps sounded on the porch.

“Hey.” She paused inside the doorframe as though waiting for an invitation to come in.

“Hey.”

Hunter grabbed the water he’d brought along from the counter and took a long swig while Rachel stepped inside.

She wore a yellow T-shirt, cut off jean shorts and flip-flops. Her toenails were painted with bright blue polish, the color of one of those slushy drinks kids loved.

She walked over to the bedroom and peered in before facing him.

“You got a lot done.”

“Mostly just removed all the trash. It’s not so bad without the junk.”

“Sorry I’m late. Cash threw a hissy fit about me living out here alone. Like I’m not old enough to take care of myself or something.”

Eye roll. Hair toss. Hunter bit down on his amusement since Rachel wouldn’t take kindly to it. He might doubt his fair share of things, but he was certain of that.

“You’re fine. I just got here. Did you work it out?”

She’d bent down and started looking through the paint cans he’d brought over. “Yep. Where’d you get all of this paint? I should pay you for this. Cash said he’d cover supplies since he’s the one benefiting. Said to tell you thanks for helping out.” She paused. Let out an audible breath. “And that anyone who puts up with me should get a medal for it.”

Quiet laughter shook his chest. “He did not say that.”

She met his eyes, a smile tracing her lips. “He was joking. He did say thank-you, though.”

Hunter nodded toward the supplies. “There’s no need to pay for any of that. I had some stuff left over from my house. Didn’t buy a thing.”

“Your house?” Her tone carried surprise.

“Yeah, I built a few years back.”

“Don’t you live with your dad?”

“Nope. My house is on the west side of our property. Not too far from here.” Hunter knelt to look through the tool bag he’d brought. “You know my dad. He had his fists wound so tight he

would never have let me have any ownership of the ranch until he left this earth. I threatened to work somewhere else if he didn't let me buy in. I wouldn't have, but he didn't call my bluff."

Rachel's mouth swung open as if on a hinge. What had she thought? That he'd just sat around pining for her all of these years? Hunter grabbed an adjustable wrench, dropped to the floor and scooted the upper half of his body under the sink, wincing at his thoughts. Those old hurts always seemed to pop up with her when he least expected it. Friendship didn't hold grudges.

"Cash said that's leaking." Her voice sounded hollow from his perch inside the cabinet.

"I can tell. That's what I'm working on."

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