
Chapter 1

Cora sighed as she listened to her mother on the phone. When she could get a word in edgewise, she said calmly, "Mom, that's just not necessary. You have a lot on your plate right now. When my flight gets in to San Antonio from New York, I'll rent a car and drive to Fredericksburg. I'll be there in plenty of time for the visitation and the funeral. You don't need to take time out to drive to the airport to pick me up."

"Are you sure, honey? Because I don't mind," her mother asked again.

"I'm positive. Now, I really have to get off here and finish some work, or I'll have to bring it with me to finish there." She grimaced as she looked at the slush pile waiting for her on her desk. "Okay, Mom, I'll call you when I land and let you know I'm on my way. Give Daddy my love."

It was January, and Cora's paternal grandmother had just passed away. She planned to fly home for the funeral and stick around for a few weeks to help her parents get her gram's house ready to sell. Her parents had devoted their time to caring for Gram since she'd taken ill a few years before, and now, Cora expected they would fulfill their dream of retiring in the San

Antonio area to be near her sister, or, if not, she hoped they would take some time to travel, at least.

Picking up the manuscript on top of the stack, she sighed and began to read. It was yet another romance. *If only real life could be like the stories these people write about*, she thought as she skimmed through the pages.

She'd been the acquisitions editor for a fairly large publishing house in New York City for the past three years. After completing her master's degree in journalism, she'd worked for a smaller publishing company in Chicago before landing her dream job. She had a wonderful loft apartment, many friends, and traveled considerably, both for work and for pleasure. She had come a long way since her cheerleader days in Fredericksburg. Still an attractive blonde, she wore her hair just slightly shorter now, in a stylish bob cut, and her clothes were from some of the best stores in New York. She had casual dinner or theatre dates now and again but had never had the time or the inclination to pursue a serious relationship—not since her high school romance with Dale Barton. He had been right, of course, about the breakup, even though she hadn't been able to see it at the time.

She and Dale had stayed in touch for a few years, but eventually the calls and emails became less and less frequent, until one day they had simply ceased to exist. She knew he had obtained his law degree and had passed the bar. The last she knew, he was working for a law firm in the Austin area, having moved there after finishing law school at Baylor. She had no idea if he was still there, if he had married, if he had a family, or anything else about him.

Her perky assistant Audrey walked in with a sandwich from the deli down the street. "I thought you might be hungry. I know you're trying to get through some of these manuscripts before you leave in the morning."

"Thank you, Audrey. I doubt I'll get through more than this one I'm reading now, though. I'll take some to Texas with me, and Kayla will take the rest."

"I'm sorry about your grandmother. I hope your visit goes well."

"Gram was not a young woman, Audrey. And I expect the visit will be fine, once we get through the funeral."

"I'll leave you, so you can finish reading. I'll see you when you get back from Texas, then." Audrey smiled as she turned to leave.

"Thanks, Audrey," she replied as she unwrapped the corned beef sandwich and took a bite. She washed it down with a sip of coffee and returned to her reading. Every year, the publishing house ran a three-month open submission promo in order for new, un-agented authors to submit their works in the hopes of being published. Cora had discovered a few with real potential and actually looked forward to reading the submissions when the time rolled around.

Reading until well past closing time, she packed her briefcase with the work she was taking with her, put the others in a stack for one of the other editors, Kayla, and put her laptop in its bag before locking her office and heading to her car. She had driven rather than taking the subway that morning, and now she wondered if that had been a wise decision, as tired as she was. She planned to finish the manuscript before the night was over. She'd already decided to offer a contract for it but wanted to finish the story, anxious to see how it ended.

When she reached her apartment, she decided to soak in a hot bath with a glass of wine before packing and reading.

As she sank into the warm, lavender-scented bubbles, she allowed herself to unwind for the first time that day. Taking a sip of the sweet red wine, she laid her head back and closed her tired eyes. *I'm going home*, she thought, and sighed. *It's been a while; I wonder if I'll get to see any of the old gang, besides Tori*. Tori White had been her best friend growing up in Texas, and she'd emailed her to let her know she'd be in town. Tori had replied, telling her she would be at the funeral and she hoped they could spend some time together.

Finishing her bath, she warmed up leftover Chinese takeout

from the night before, and after donning her favorite pink satin nightshirt, she crawled under the covers with the manuscript and almond chicken. She got up once to take her dishes to the kitchen and throw some things in a suitcase before finishing the story.

At one o'clock, she put the manuscript aside and emailed the legal department to draw up a contract to send to the author. Closing her laptop and turning out the light, she rolled over and was asleep within minutes. The manuscript she had just read had ended happily for the hero and heroine, and Cora dreamed about the couple in the story.

When she awoke to the blaring sound of her alarm clock six hours later, she jumped out of bed and began to hurriedly finish packing for her trip to Texas. Once she had closed the suitcase and dressed in comfortable jeans and a sweater, she threw on a warm jacket and called a taxi to drive her to the airport. She knew that, although it was January, the weather would be mild in Fredericksburg, so she had tried to adjust her packing accordingly.

By the time she arrived that afternoon, she had received the contract from legal and emailed it to the new author and read part of a mystery novel that had been submitted by another prospective new author. Luckily, she didn't have any more to read, having left the majority of them with Kayla. She could catch up on the rest when she returned to New York in two weeks.

She rented a car at the airport and began the scenic drive to Fredericksburg, savoring the familiar sights she saw along the way. Arriving at her parents' home a few hours later, she was greeted by her dad, who had walked out to help her with her luggage.

"Sweetie, it's so good to have you home," he said as he gave her one of his famous bear hugs.

"Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry about Gram. It's good to be home, though. Is Mom here?"

"She and your sister have gone out to buy some last-minute things. I believe they were also going to buy an outfit for the baby to wear to the funeral."

"Ah, my little niece, I can't wait to see Adele."

"She's growing by leaps and bounds."

Cora's younger sister Cassie was now married, having met a young architect while attending college. He was from the San Antonio area, and that was where they had settled after their marriage. Cassie was a nurse and had recently gone back to work on a part time basis. Her baby girl Adele had just turned four-months-old.

Clay, Cassie's husband, was very attractive—light hair, blue eyes, tall, with a delightful dimple in his chin. He and Cassie made a striking couple, as she too had fair hair and blue-gray eyes.

After her dad had deposited her bags in her old bedroom and she had unpacked, she walked downstairs to the kitchen, where he was pouring a cup of coffee for each of them.

"Sit down, Cora; chat with me while the others are gone," he invited as he handed her a mug of steaming coffee.

"Hazelnut, you remembered that I like it," she responded as she gratefully sipped one of her favorite brews.

"Now, how could I forget something as important as that?" he teased as he joined her at the kitchen table. "Tell me what's new in your life, sweetheart."

"Nothing much; I'm busy with work right now, and I'll be going to a show for the company in the next month or so in Los Angeles."

"You lead a pretty exciting life these days, don't you?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't exactly call it exciting, but I love what I do."

"You haven't mentioned that you're dating, I noticed. Is there still no one special in your life?" he inquired as he looked at her over his cup.

"No, Dad, there is no one special."

"Cora, are you planning to remain single forever and not give me any grandchildren?"

"Funny you should say that, because I can remember a time when I would have liked nothing more than to do just that, and you were totally against it," she reminded him gently.

"If you're referring to your high school romance with Dale Barton, that was years ago. Surely, you must realize the timing wasn't right back then," he replied, surprised she'd brought up the subject after all these years.

"Oh, Daddy, of course, I do. I couldn't see it then, but I know it was for the best. I have to admit, though, I've never met anyone since Dale that I would even consider sharing every aspect of my life with," she admitted, taking another sip of the hot, flavored coffee.

"He's an attorney now, in Austin, I believe," her dad remarked, looking speculatively at his oldest daughter.

"That was the last I knew about him. We don't keep in touch anymore."

They were interrupted by the arrival of her mother, sister, and niece then, so the conversation ceased. After hugs and the expected gushing over the baby, Cora asked, "Where's Clay?"

"He'll be here in time for the viewing. He had to finish up some things at work before he could get away."

Cora looked down at the baby she held in her arms. "Are you missing your daddy, sweet thing?"

"Yes, she is. I can't wait for him to get here and get her to sleep. He does a much better job of that than I do." Cassie laughed as she took the baby from her sister. "It's time to get this little princess fed and into her PJs."

"Mom, is there anything I can do to help you?" Cora asked as her mother put away the groceries she had purchased.

"No, honey, the neighbors have brought dinner, so I just need to warm it up. Just sit and tell me all your news while I get it ready."

The family got caught up over a delicious dinner, and after the baby had finally settled down, they all tried to get some sleep.

The next few days were busy as they attended the viewing and funeral for her beloved Gram. She saw many familiar faces and shared many memories with the people who had come to pay their respects.

As they were leaving the gravesite after the funeral, Tori stepped beside her and began walking with her. "I'll call you the end of the week. Maybe we can get together and go out this weekend."

"That sounds good. I'll be busy helping clean out Gram's house and getting it ready to sell, but by the weekend, I'll be more than ready for a break, I'm sure," she replied as she smiled at her old friend.

The two women hugged when they reached Cora's dad's waiting car.

"I'll talk to you in a few days," Cora told her as she got into the car.

"You can count on it," Tori replied as she started toward her own vehicle.

As the week wound down, Tori kept her word and called Cora. "So, how's the packing going?"

"I had no idea my grandmother had so much stuff," Cora told her, laughing.

"Then I'd say you should be about ready for a break any time then, right?"

"Definitely, what do you have in mind? Are we going to the old high school haunts?"

"Oh, no, I'd say we've outgrown all those. I'm going to take you out on the town, big girl style." Tori giggled.

"I can't wait to see the nightlife in Fredericksburg," she replied with a laugh.

"I know it won't compare to the lights of the city, but maybe you'll see some old friends. Even the married ones go out, occasionally."

"Well, since it's Friday night, I guess I can take a break and scope out the local entertainment," Cora agreed, glad of an excuse to get out of the house and away from the memories.

"Just come to my place whenever you're ready to go," Tori told her.

"I'll finish the room I'm working in, then I'll go back to Mom and Dad's to get cleaned up."

"Okay, take your time. The nightlife doesn't get going until around nine, anyway."

"See you in a bit."

"Bye," Tori said as she ended the call.

Cora picked up the box of photographs she'd been about to go through before Tori's call had interrupted her work. She leafed through the first few, and as she picked up the next faded photo, she froze. It was a picture of her senior prom. She was standing in her sequined formal, hair in an updo of cascading curls, with a brilliant smile on her youthful face. Dale was standing next to her with his arm around her waist, looking at the camera with his familiar grin. He was in a tux, and even at eighteen he exuded an aura of sensuality. He'd always been the most handsome boy in the class, and Cora had been the envy of every girl in school.

I wonder what he looks like now, she thought to herself and then giggled. *He's probably gained fifty pounds and has started going bald.*

Tucking the photo hurriedly into her purse, she put the remaining photos in the box with the others she had discovered and carried it to the car to take to her parents' house.

As she drove the distance between houses, her mind wandered back to that August night, twelve years before. *I wonder if he ever got married. I'm sure he has by now. And most of all, I wonder if he ever thinks about me the way I think about him.*

Shaking her pretty blonde head to rid her mind of the useless thoughts of Dale that had found their way there, she pulled into the driveway and hauled the box of photos into the house.

"Is that the last box of pictures?" her mother asked as she walked in and set the box on the dining room table.

"I certainly hope so," she replied. "I had no idea Gram had so many of them stashed away like that."

"She always said she was going to organize them into albums, but apparently, that never happened."

"Apparently," Cora replied dryly. "I'm going out with Tori tonight, so I may be in late. She thinks I need to enjoy some Fredericksburg nightlife while I'm in town."

"Maybe you'll run into some of your old friends. I'm not sure how many still live here."

"Tori says quite a few, actually," she answered as she walked to her old bedroom.

"It probably seems strange to you to be back here after living in New York and Chicago all these years, doesn't it?"

She thought for a minute before replying, "In a way, yes, and in other ways, it's as if I never left."

She walked into the bedroom and gathered her things before heading into the bathroom to shower. As the steamy stream of hot water cascaded onto her luscious body, her mind went back to Dale. *I wonder what my life would be like now if I'd stayed here, if I'd followed my heart and married Dale, if he hadn't broken things off that night. I can't think about that. Look at the fantastic life I have. I've traveled all over the world, met all kinds of people, live in a great place. Alone... I live alone. Stop this, Cora... stop it now.*

She hadn't thought about Dale in months. She should have known coming home would bring back a flood of memories. For years, she had dreamed about him and counted the days and months until they could reconnect. She remembered the promise and the kiss that had sealed it. Then, finally, one day, she didn't think about him; the next day, she didn't think about him, and eventually, she'd come to terms with the fact that it really was over and the promise they'd made had been a silly thing between young lovers. They were adults now, leading very different lives in very different cities.

She stepped out of the shower and tied her golden hair up into a towel, turban style, as she briskly dried her body with another towel. She had chosen black jeans and a shimmery black shirt, with designer boots, for her evening out. She then chose her jewelry carefully. As she applied her makeup and dried her hair, she wondered what the evening would bring. Grabbing a small bag and filling it with the essentials, she was ready to go. As she threw a jacket over the shirt, she yelled goodbye to her parents and headed out the door to the Toyota she had rented at the airport.

She arrived at Tori's and, of course, had to wait for her friend. Tori had never been ready on time a day in her life. She sat down and looked around at the condo her friend owned and smiled. It was modern yet homey. Tori had done a marvelous job decorating it.

When Tori finally appeared, Cora asked, "Is Jonathan meeting us there?"

"Nope, I told him this was our night. I only see you once in a blue moon. I see him every day."

"Are you two ever going to tie the knot? You've been seeing each other—how many years now?" she teased her pretty redheaded friend.

"We probably will, someday. It's been five years, but neither of us has been in a hurry. He's been hinting lately, though, so it may not be too far off. I'll surprise you someday and give you a call, asking you to come home and be my maid of honor."

"I'm glad you found someone like him. He seems perfect for you."

"He *is* perfect for me. But what about you, Cora, is there someone special back in New York?"

"No, there's no one special at the moment. I go out, but I've just never been lucky enough to find Mr. Right. Maybe I'll be a single career gal all my life."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Just look at you. You always were beautiful, but you are absolutely stunning these days."

"Oh, Tori, you're still nuts." She giggled.

"Let's get out of here. Who knows, maybe you'll meet him right here in Texas? Wouldn't that be a hoot?"

"Yeah, that'd be a hoot, all right. I'll probably meet some cowboy."

"Maybe those New York guys aren't right for you, because you really do belong with a good old Texas boy."

Cora giggled as they walked out the door, but deep in her heart, she knew that what Tori had said was true. She had always belonged with a certain good old Texas boy, and that boy was Dale Barton.