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## Chapter 1

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**D**eputy Sawyer Crawford was cruising back to the small town of Breakwater, Texas. He was familiar with this stretch of road, as he should be. His family ranch was on it. Someone had called in a report that a steer was running loose on the road. He'd taken care of the problem and threatened to write the local rancher a citation if he didn't get his fence fixed. This was Elroy Fry's third warning. The next call would cost him a sixty-dollar fine if the stubborn old rancher didn't fix the problem.

Sawyer was sitting back and enjoying the day when he saw her. She was standing in front of a Jeep with her hands stuck in the back pockets of skin-tight jeans. Since he was approaching her from behind, he got a good look at a magnificent backside. He pulled the Sheriff Department's vehicle behind her Jeep and stopped, but she never took her eyes off the billboard.

He circled around the woman, and he saw a front that complimented the back, trim and well built in the right places. She had dark blonde hair, pulled into a ponytail, and eyes covered with dark sunglasses.

"May I help you, Miss?" Sawyer asked.

She turned to look at him, pulled the sunglasses to the tip of her nose, and looked over them.

“You can tell me who owns this monstrosity.”

Sawyer looked into violet-colored eyes and then glanced over his shoulder at a billboard and back to the woman. “That’s you!” he exclaimed.

“It was my face, but the rest of it wasn’t me. That was a creation of a graphic arts expert,” the woman said. She offered her hand. “I’m Jolene Nicks, and I’d like to find the owner of that billboard.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m moving to Breakwater, and I don’t want that atrocity staring me in the face every time I go down this road,” she said.

Sawyer tipped his hat back on his head, admiring the billboard. “That might be a problem,” he said. “There’s not a cowboy or teenage boy that hasn’t had a crush or fallen in love with the idea of that girl in the last decade.”

“It’s an advertisement for boots!”

“Ms. Nicks, when men are looking at that billboard, they are not looking at the boots!”

“Sheriff, are you going to tell me who owns this billboard or not?” the young woman demanded.

“Deputy, ma’am, Breakwater’s Sheriff is Wayne Cortland. The owner of this very fine billboard is me, and I can tell you honestly that I’m really fond of it,” Sawyer admitted. “It puts a smile on my face every morning on my way to work. If I take the billboard down, there’s going to be a whole bunch of upset cowboys around here.”

Jolene Nicks shoved her sunglasses back into place. “I guess Breakwater isn’t as friendly a town as I thought,” she said, turning on her heel. She sashayed to the Jeep, sped off, and was speeding before she took the first turn in the road.

“Hey!” Sawyer shouted, but she was gone. He turned

around, looking at the billboard. He'd come home on an emergency military leave more than a decade ago. Sawyer still enjoyed looking at the pretty girl, wearing cowboy boots, a smile, and not much more. He'd had an instant crush on her when the billboard had changed from a cigarette advertisement to a beautiful girl when he'd come home on leave. It had taken his breath away and revved up his engines the first time he'd seen it. Not much had changed since. He was still entranced by those violet eyes, and while Ms. Jolene Nicks might claim the body wasn't hers, from what he'd seen, it was a pretty close match.

His father had earned a little extra money allowing the billboard advertisements on his property. Every dollar counted when there wasn't much income coming in from the small ranch, and beef prices were down. Sawyer had preserved the billboard with a clear waterproof varnish the first time he'd had the chance. He'd never rented the billboard space to another vendor, leaving it exactly the way he liked it. His male friends had teased him, but they had to admit they enjoyed a look every time they drove by it too. The billboard was a landmark for Breakwater if you entered the town from the south. Now, the girl on the billboard wasn't a mystery. She had a name, and she was moving to Breakwater!

Jolene Nicks, up close and in person, was a lot prettier. Sawyer didn't want to upset her, but keeping the girl on the billboard had been a mainstay for many years. He was going to give the billboard more thought now. He couldn't have the pretty Ms. Nicks thinking Breakwater was an unfriendly town.

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Deputy Sawyer Crawford pulled his cruiser to a stop in front of an old porch attached to an equally ancient ranch house. It had only taken one phone call to Sharon Bennington, the only realtor in town, to discover Jolene Nicks' destination.

The old Brubaker place hadn't been occupied for a while, and it looked it. Gutters and shutters were hanging loose, paint was peeling, and broken windows were boarded over.

The house was a Folk Victorian, relatively plain as rotted and dangling latticework hung from the porches and gables. The old clapboard siding was holding up surprisingly well, as was a slate roof.

Sawyer opened his cruiser door and got out as a little boy raced around the corner of the house, laughing and chanting an old country song.

"Jolene! Jolene! Please don't take my man!"

"Tyler Jay!" a woman's voice yelled, but the tone of voice didn't sound angry. It sounded amused. The youngster squealed, laughed, and ran.

Sawyer turned as Jolene Nicks ran around the corner of the house with a hose in her hand, and she blasted the little boy. Unfortunately, the runt had stepped directly in front of Sawyer. He was hit with a full blast of water right in the crotch.

"Uh, oh!" the little boy exclaimed, backing away. He took off with the speed of a jackrabbit.

"Oh!" Jolene exclaimed. Her arm jerked upward, and the stream of water hit him in the chest.

"Oh! Sorry!" she exclaimed, aiming the hose across the lawn with a laugh and twisting the nozzle. "You weren't my target!"

"No kidding," Sawyer growled. He looked down at his dripping uniform.

"Sorry, it was an accident," Jolene exclaimed, trying not to laugh but not succeeding very well. "Did you need something?"

"A hairbrush and you over my knee would settle the score," Sawyer growled.

"Would you settle for a towel, a cup of coffee, and the use of the clothes dryer?"

"If it includes a sandwich, I might," Sawyer said. "I haven't had lunch yet."

“You have a choice of deli ham, turkey, or grilled cheese,” she offered.

Sawyer looked down at his wet uniform and to the boy who was hiding behind a tree trunk. He crooked his finger at the boy to come to him.

The boy looked to Jolene first and stepped out tentatively. Fear was plastered on his young face. His dark brown eyes, almost the same color as his skin, were large with fright.

Jolene took a couple steps toward the boy, but Sawyer held up a hand to stop her. He turned to his vehicle. He opened the trunk, set a basket of cloths and car washing materials on the ground, pulled out several towels, and handed them to the boy.

“Take these towels and wipe up any water that got inside the vehicle,” Sawyer said to the boy. “Don’t touch the radio knobs or any of the buttons. If you’re interested, I’ll show you what they do when I get dried off.”

The boy looked at Jolene, and she nodded. “It’s fair,” she said.

“Come around to the back door,” she ordered. “Have you got a name besides Sheriff?”

“Deputy,” he supplied, following her to a dilapidated back porch that led to a kitchen that was a mix of old and older. “The title is deputy. The name is Sawyer Crawford. Is there some reason you can’t use the front door?”

“The porch has a large hole in the flooring, and the steps are dangerous. It’s blocked by a big old hall tree. It’s a heavy sucker, and we can’t budge it. Stop right there!” Jolene ordered when he’d taken a step inside the kitchen. She disappeared and returned with a large terrycloth robe, the one-size-fits-all kind used at expensive hotels and spas. She pointed to the appliances on the closed-in back porch. “Those are working. I’ve already tested them, although there is a leak behind the washer.”

Sawyer felt a little silly wrapped in a robe, but that was probably because he’d never owned one. A bachelor, he’d lived alone

for the last couple of years and walked around naked if it suited him. He couldn't do that in front of a woman he'd had secret fantasies about for years. Entering the kitchen, he was feeling somewhat awkward.

Jolene Nicks barely looked up from assembling several sandwiches. She waved him to the vintage 1950's dinette table. "Sweet tea, cola, or bottled water?"

"That coffee you offered would hit the spot."

"Sorry, I spoke too soon. I used the last of the coffee this morning, and what's left in the pot would probably take the enamel off your teeth."

"I'm an ex-marine. That's the way we drink it," Sawyer said.

She shrugged and emptied the coffee pot into a large mug.

He took a sip and grimaced. "Okay! You warned me. Maybe, I'll try the sweet tea. Who's the kid?"

The hand carrying the tea pitcher wobbled, but she caught it before it could spill and set it on the table.

"How do you know he's not mine?"

"I Googled you," Sawyer said, taking a bite of the sandwich. "The information might be outdated and sketchy, but there was no mention of you having a kid. Jolene Nicks, child model. First child model to have a multi-million dollar contract before you were seven years old. You were in a bunch of kid-friendly movies and disappeared at fifteen. You reappeared at eighteen and sued your guardians for mismanaging your funds. The courts awarded you an undisclosed amount in damages."

"At least the courts kept their mouths shut on that, and my so-called guardians took off before the court dates on other charges," Jolene said. She looked around the small kitchen. "Even getting this place back was a battle, and they never owned it. Emilene Brubaker was a great great aunt I didn't know about. She willed it to me, and it was a surprise. She made sure the taxes were paid from a trust account, and it was untouchable. My

bastard relatives tried their best to get their hands on it, but they never managed to do it.

“I spent years running from relatives who used me and years fighting in the courts to recover a fraction of what I earned. They tried to steal everything from me, including Tyler. If you read the tabloid stories, they reported it differently. I was the spoiled, entitled brat. Screw them!”

“That was a good dodge, and it answered some of my questions, but not the one I asked,” Sawyer said. “Where did the kid come from?”

Jolene walked over to the window and looked out to ensure the boy wasn't around and listening. “I'm not the only one Paula and Fred Hollis screwed up. Tyler is mine because I adopted him. Tyler was my cousin Georgina's child.

“Georgina had problems... men, alcohol, and substances when she could get her hands on them. She went in whatever direction her current boyfriend drifted. If he was a drinker, she drank. If he was into drugs, she joined in. She didn't need much persuasion. She could find the dealers without help. When I reappeared, she looked me up and would drop in to stay with me between boyfriends.

“I put her into rehab several times, but she didn't change her habits or her lifestyle. Three years ago, she stopped by, and she was high on something. She wanted money. I wanted her to leave Tyler with me and go into rehab again. She didn't want any part of my plan, and I refused to give her money because I knew it would be spent on drugs.

“A couple of weeks later, I woke up, and Tyler was asleep on my couch. She must have found where I kept a bit of cash stashed because it was gone. So were my phone and some smaller electronics and jewelry. She took small things that she could sell on the streets or in pawnshops.”

“You kept her son?”

She nodded. “It took a while to find her. I sobered her up

and put her in a tough rehab program. I had a lawyer get her to sign enough legal mumble-jumble to gain custody of Tyler. It's legal, and he's my mine."

"Where is your cousin?"

Jolene faced him. "Georgina died of an overdose seven months ago. We had a complicated relationship. She saved my life, but she wouldn't let me help save hers. She was a troubled soul and was living on the streets."

The buzzer on the dryer sounded, and she went out on the porch and returned to the kitchen. "It will be a few more minutes. You do realize what I've told you is confidential." Jolene put her hands on her hips. "Why did I tell you? I rarely explain our background to anyone, especially a stranger!"

"I've been told I have an honest face," Sawyer said. "People do tend to confide in me. Why did you come to Breakwater?"

"Because I was tired of living where I was living. We lived in what was supposed to be a good and safe neighborhood. Over the last couple of years, something has gone terribly wrong. People are camping in the parks, going through my garbage cans, and stealing everything that isn't permanently attached. Sometimes that didn't stop them. My home has been broken into three times.

"I came home one day to human feces on my patio and three naked men I didn't know using my pool and Jacuzzi and eating my food. I called the police and was told not to antagonize them, that most likely they were harmless. My call wasn't a priority since I didn't report seeing any weapons. Four hours later, the cops finally arrived. By then, my *guests* had broken an iron gate, emptied an outdoor refrigerator, and they walked off with some very expensive barbecue equipment. When I complained that I needed to have the pool and Jacuzzi drained, cleaned, and sanitized, the police told me I couldn't. If I did, they would have to cite me for wasting water. It was okay for people I didn't know to trespass, steal, and defecate on my property, but I would be



breaking the law if I wanted a clean pool? What happened to common sense?

“I’d just paid the taxes on this place, and it was fresh in my mind. My next phone call was to the county clerk in Breakwater. I’m hoping it will be different here.”

“Texans are known for common sense,” Sawyer said, looking around a kitchen that hadn’t been changed much since the 1950s. “The closest thing to a swimming pool is the creek about a half-mile from here.” His eyes roamed over the old room. “I don’t see how this fits with your previous life.”

Jolene looked around the old kitchen. “The retro look is a temporary necessity, and I kinda like it. It feels comfortable.

“If all you know about me is what you read on Google, you don’t know me. I want Tyler to have what Georgina and I didn’t. I want him to go to a regular school, where kids don’t bully other kids for their lack of brand-name sneakers or cell phones. I want him to know how to do chores. That homework and manners are a priority over fitting in with a particular crowd or posting on social media.

“On the advice of my realtor, I left my furniture behind so the house would sell faster. Buyers like to see a *staged* home. There’s already a contract on my house. As soon as the loan is approved, a moving company will be called, and my stuff will be on its way here.”

“Where were you when you went missing as a teenager?” Sawyer asked.

“As far away from my relatives as possible, and I moved around a lot,” Jolene said. “I bought a set of brown contact lenses, dyed my hair black, and went Goth for a while. I did what any teenager would do if she didn’t want to be dragged back. I didn’t want to be caught, and I wasn’t! I volunteered in soup kitchens. I worked in places that didn’t ask questions, as long as the dishes got washed. Then I bought a fake birth certificate and social security card. That helped keep me employed. I tried all

kinds of things to keep a roof over my head. I spent two days as a tattoo artist's assistant."

"Only two days?"

She grinned. "I kept passing out. I have a low threshold for blood and gore. The guy who was going to teach me got tired of scraping me off the floor. He introduced me to a handyman that needed a helper. Cliff was a lifesaver at the time. There's not much I can't do when it comes to renovation." She looked around the worn kitchen. "I'm going to be using those skills.

"Deputy Crawford..."

"Just Sawyer," he interrupted.

"Sawyer," Jolene repeated. "I did what I had to do. I was lucky enough not to fall into illegal activities and found good people who helped me. I had to live independently until I was old enough to hire a lawyer and fight my so-called guardians for a portion of what I earned. I have no doubt they were hoping I was dead so they could also claim the pittance the law forces guardians of working children to set aside for them.

"I'm sure I foiled their plans by showing up alive and pissed. I had the courts lockdown most of their assets until my case against them made it before a judge." Jolene went to the back porch and brought his dried clothing back with her.

Sawyer went into a room off the kitchen and dressed. He returned to the kitchen and buckled on his utility belt and gun when the boy came inside. Tyler stood by the door hesitantly.

"I dried off the seats and everything that got wet," the boy said. He held out his hand. "I found ninety-five cents under the seats."

Sawyer pulled out his wallet, removed two one-dollar bills, and added it to the change in the boy's palm. "That's for doing a good job."

"How do you know I did a good job?" the boy asked.

"I think you did," Sawyer said. "Otherwise, how would you have found ninety-five cents? I respect your honesty."

The boy turned and looked at Jolene.

“You earned it.”

Tyler darted away, and they could hear him running into another room.

A single tear streaked down Jolene’s cheek, but with a quick swipe, it was gone. “He hides every penny he finds on sidewalks and what I give him for an allowance. He remembers his mother stealing from everyone they were around. It’s been a slow process to gain his trust. He never tells me what he wants or needs. He keeps a wish list, though, and I sneak a peek at it occasionally to surprise him.”

“What’s the most recent thing on his list?” Sawyer asked.

“A puppy,” Jolene said. “Now that we live in the country, I’m going to get him one.”

“Jean Anne Whistler runs an unofficial animal rescue. She’s the local Vet. She has a small place about three miles from town. She’s hypersensitive about the people she allows to adopt her strays. She’ll put you through an interrogation to make sure you’ll take care of it. If you want an introduction, I’d be glad to take you over there and introduce you.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer, and maybe you can put a good word in for me,” Jolene said.

Sawyer walked through a living room filled with the belongings of a woman who had been ninety-eight when she died. He eyed the large and solid-built coat tree and looked over his shoulder, and pointed to the hallway beside the stairwell. “Do you want it moved against that wall over there? That’s where Mrs. Brubaker had it.”

“If you can,” Jolene said. “I’m going to have to hire someone to haul off most of this stuff. The Gothic Revival period isn’t my favorite style of antiques.”

He shoved the heavy piece of furniture out of the way and turned the doorknob to see if it worked, but it didn’t.

“That’s a trip to the hardware store and a quick fix,” Jolene

said. "I worked with a general handyman for several years. I can handle it."

Sawyer looked around the dilapidated house and picked up his hat. "You're going to have your hands full. Stop by Martha Brigham's Antique Shop in town and talk to her. She might take some of these pieces off your hands. What she doesn't want, she can advise you on how to get rid of it."

"Thanks for lunch, although I could've done without the shower. I came by to tell you I took down the billboard. There are some good old boys mad at me, but I figured if you're going to stick around, it was for the best."

"Thanks!" Jolene said, and her face lit up with a smile.

Sawyer blinked and moved the hand that was holding his hat casually to his front. Damn, that smile would tempt any man's fate. It sure did his.

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Jolene was followed out of the hardware store by a young man who couldn't have been far past his teenage years. He was carrying a box of paint cans, and she had a box with the brushes and pans. He'd been flirting with her ever since she'd entered the store.

"There's line dancing every Saturday night at the Wild Horse Roadhouse," the young man with a nametag of Cody Nichols suggested. "You might want to come out there. It would be fun, or I could come by and help you paint," he said eagerly.

"Thank you," Jolene said, shaking her head to discourage him. "It's a job I want to do myself, and I don't think my boyfriend would approve."

"Okay," the persistent young man said, finally getting the message. He returned to the store.

An older woman was leaning against her car in the parking lot next to the Jeep. "You're Jolene Nicks, aren't you? My cousin

Theresa works over at the county office. She told me you were moving to the old Brubaker place, but I didn't believe it."

"Believe it," Jolene said. "It was left to me by a great aunt I never met."

"Emilene Brubaker," the woman clarified. "Theresa didn't say anything about a boyfriend or a husband."

"I don't believe that information was needed to get the directions to the property," Jolene said. She looked over her shoulder to the hardware store. "The boyfriend claim was to discourage him. I've never found a good use for a boyfriend or husband."

The older woman laughed. "I'm Imogene Fairweather. I'm the Mayor of Breakwater, and I welcome you to our town."

Jolene smiled. "Jolene Nicks and good for you! The testosterone around here is pretty potent."

"You'll get used to it, honey," the mayor laughed. "If you're smart, you'll learn to appreciate it."