

So the princess of Lockhardt, Texas was here after all. Jackson Taylor squinted through the viewfinder and snapped a picture of Kathleen, sitting on the quad with a bevy of girlfriends. Giggling and laughing. Wavy, auburn hair spilled over her shoulders as she talked, smiling at her friends. She leaned against the tree - his tree, damn it - and crossed her booted feet at the ankle. He snapped a picture as she turned her head to the left. Then another as she stood and raised her face to the sun. No sign that her world was anything but the privileged, happy life he'd been denied.

Not that he cared. Being independent had more ups than downs. He didn't have to set foot in Podunk, USA ever again. He'd never step in cow crap, have to get up at the butt-crack of dawn to feed animals that weren't cuddly or fun to play with. He could sleep til noon if he wanted. Drive fast cars if he wanted.

No family dinners. No family pressures. No ties that would strangle him until he broke.

He was better off alone.

The girls started moving, heading off in different directions, waving to one another. Probably making plans for their next sorority gathering. Not that he cared. Kathleen headed in his general direction, a notebook clasped in her arms as she nibbled her lower lip. He snapped another picture. And another, the hatching eggs in the tree forgotten for a moment.

He sighed. He didn't care, not a bit. One more year and he'd have his degree and he'd be out of Texas for good. Jackson refocused the lens on the nest of blue jays in the tree above the quad. Three eggs had already hatched, and he'd missed them. The fourth hadn't. If he were patient he could shoot it hatching and impress the bejesus out of his professor.

Forget Kathleen Witte, he ordered himself.

Eyes trained on the nest, Jackson waited.

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Kathleen Witte made her way across the quad, day-dreaming of the day she'd finally be here, at U-TEP and away from the smothering confines of the ranch. She didn't want to be away forever. A few years at college would do it. Added benefit, her degree in Ag Studies would be the final proof for Grandfather that a woman could actually run the Double Diamond.

Grandfather, of course, wanted her to go to school in Austin. Just over an hour from the ranch. No way. With only an hour to drive she'd be expected back every weekend and at the drop of a hat during the week, too. That was no way to focus on her studies. El Paso had a great ag program and - added benefit - is was an eight hour drive. No quick weekend trips home. Holidays, yes. Weekends, no. Just the way she wanted it.

Assuming she actually got in. She'd been wait-listed - she didn't even know that could happen. But she would meet with the dean today and, if everything went well, by August she'd been in the program.

She turned, holding her notebook close to her chest, walking backward so she could see the quad and the big, brick buildings. She loved U-TEP already. This had to work.

Kathleen's foot hit a rock, knocking her off balance. Her arms cartwheeled, her notebook flew into the air and Kathleen landed in a heap, spread-eagled over an unsuspecting male co-ed.

A hunk of an unsuspecting male co-ed. Shaggy hair, goatee, broad shoulders and a set of abs that would make a grown woman cry.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't see you." Her tummy flip-flopped as she took in his athletic shorts, plain, white t-shirt and sneakers. His skin was already tanning from the spring sunshine.

"Obviously." He pushed her off his chest and sat up. That's when she saw the camera, lying on its side at a funny angle.

"Oh, God, I didn't break it, did I?" Great, the cutest guy she'd seen so far and she'd probably ruined his camera. Should she offer to buy a new one?

He shook his head as his hands gingerly lifted the black camera and tripod from the grass. He examined the pieces, his eyebrows furrowed. He clicked a few buttons, looked through the view-finder and clicked off a few frames.

"No harm, no foul," he said. "Just needs a good clean when I get back to the dorm."

"I'll pay to have it cleaned." Kathleen stood as the boy did, wiping her hands down the legs of her jeans as she did. Her notebook landed a few feet away but no papers spilled out. She should go but was reluctant to leave.

"No need. Go on about your day." He dismissed her.

"I'm Kathleen Witte."

"I know." He didn't look at her. He took the long lens from the camera, zipped it into a case and then put the rest of the camera in another case. He folded up the tripod and slung it across his shoulder.

"You do?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

Did they? Surely not. Sure, Grandfather's ranch was well-known, but she and her sisters had rarely gone anywhere outside Lockhardt. "No, I'm sure they don't. How do you know who I am? What's your name?"

His gaze shuttered. "Jackson Taylor." He turned away, walking across the quad. Obviously done with their conversation.

Oh, well that explained it. Ty Henderson's older brother. The brother who hated ranch life so much he never came home over holiday breaks or summer vacations. Kathleen couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him around Lockhardt.

Kathleen hurried to catch up to him. "I remember you now," she said. "You haven't been home for a while. I've got this meeting with the dean about fall semester but maybe you could show me around later?"

"Doubt it."

"Why not? You could tell me all the places and professors to avoid."

"I'm not the U-TEP Welcoming Committee."

"But I owe you, for ruining your camera."

"And taking time out of my day is going to pay me back? Besides, the camera's fine."

"I could buy you lunch."

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope."

He slid the tripod from his shoulder, set it up and pulled a different camera from his case. "Go have your meeting. I'll be shooting these birds for a while. If I'm still here, maybe I can find time for a short tour."

A smile stretched across Kathleen's face. "Great. Well, I'll see you in a few minutes then."

"Mmmm." Jackson was already concentrated on the tree where, Kathleen assumed, some birds were hiding.

Jackson Taylor. Just one more reason to convince the dean she belonged at U-TEP in the fall.

Texas, present day

Kathleen slammed a few more t-shirts and sundresses into her suitcase, tossed in a couple pairs of strappy sandals and her favorite Lucchesse boots and zipped it shut.

Didn't know how to have fun, indeed.

If she didn't know how to have fun would she leave the ranch at the drop of a hat for vacation in Puerto Vallarta? No, she wouldn't. Vanessa could kiss her butt. Kathleen sat at her computer to print off her boarding pass and make a few last minute notes for her trainer. He'd have to work Jester on his own for a few days.

He'd love that, and Jester could use the break from her. She and Jester been training hard for the past six months. He knew the course backward, forward and sideways. For her, she found most of her dreams centered on the course Jester would take at the World Equestrian Games. It was good for him - for both of them - but the constant training, training, training was beginning to show. Jester wasn't enthusiastic about the course. He'd balked – twice – today at jumps that were second nature to him.

Even horses needed a break now and then.

It was only a few days.

She shouldn't go, Vanessa's challenge or not. Actually *because* of Van's challenge. Kathleen knew better than to take anything her sister said seriously. Vanessa was flighty, just like her mother. She didn't understand what it took to keep a ranch the size of the Double Diamond running like a well-oiled machine.

Oh, who was she kidding? Kathleen slumped onto the corner of her bed and pulled a lavender pillow to her chest. She wasn't going. She didn't have time to throw a fit.

Grandfather opened the bedroom door.

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving."

"Yes, you are."

Kathleen shook her head. "Too much to do, you know that."

"We can handle things for a few days without you. There's a break in the training schedule for the working horses. Jester's running faster than ever." He sat in the Queen

Anne chair before the fire place. "Everyone deserves a break now and then, Kathy-bean."

"You've never taken a vacation in your life."

"I lived my vacation for a lot of years before I settled down here. Rodeoing is hard work but its also a lot of fun. So go on your trip, not because Vanessa goaded you into it but because you deserve it. Over the last six months I've seen a different side of you, Kath. It's a side I like."

"But-"

"No. Go on your vacation, sweetheart. Go and when you come home, the ranch will be waiting for you."

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Jackson looked over the papers on his desk. His investigator found her, or at least her last known address. Maybe this time he'd get the answers he was looking for.

Maria Taylor, San Antonio and an address in a seamy neighborhood. What was he waiting for? He had time this summer. After the swimsuit shoot in Puerto Vallarta, his calendar was cleared for the summer. The art show was scheduled for September. He had time to stop over in San Antonio for a few days, look up his mother and ask a few pointed questions.

Like why she'd left for bread all those years ago and never returned.

He paced to the window and looked down on the street. He loved New York. The crowds kept him company and no one asked questions. No one cared about his past.

But Texas. He shook his head. He hadn't been back to Texas, other than a couple of layovers in Houston or Dallas, since graduation. Well, San Antonio wasn't Lockhardt. A framed print on the opposite wall caught his eye. Kathleen, on the quad at U-TEP, face lifted to the sun. He'd never sold the image but it got him the attention of a fashion photographer after college.

Carefully, he folded the papers and returned them to the envelope. The magazine shoot in Puerto Vallarta would take a week at most. He could stay over in San Antonio for a week, at most, and be back in New York with plenty of time to finish up the pictures for the art show.

He would find Maria and put his past to rest. Maybe that would excise Texas from his thoughts.