



# MS. PATTI

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# KATHY IVAN

# **MS. PATTI**

**TEXAS BOUDREAU BROTHERHOOD**

By  
KATHY IVAN

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## About the Author

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Shiloh Springs, Texas! Don't you just love a small Texas town, where the people are neighborly, the gossip plentiful, and the heroes are ...well, heroic, not to mention easy on the eyes! I love everything about Texas, which I why I've made the great state my home for over thirty years. There's no other place like it. From the delicious Tex-Mex food and downhome barbecue, the majestic scenery, and friendly atmosphere, the people and places of the Lone Star state are as unique and colorful as you'll find anywhere.

The Texas Boudreau Brotherhood series centers around a group of foster brothers, men who would have ended up in the system if not for Douglas and Patricia Boudreau. Instead of being hardened by life and circumstances beyond their control, they found a family who loved and accepted them, and gave them a place to call home. Sometimes brotherhood is more than sharing the same DNA.

If you've read my other romantic suspense books (the New Orleans Connection series and Cajun Connection series), you'll be familiar with the Boudreau name. Turns out there are a whole lot of Boudreaus out there, just itching to have their stories told. (Douglas is the brother of Gator Boudreau, patriarch of the New Orleans branch of the Boudreau family.) And keep your eyes peeled, because you might see more Boudreaus popping up around Shiloh Springs, because Douglas and Gator have another brother—Hank “The Tank” Boudreau.

So, sit back and relax. The pace of small-town living might be less hectic than the big city, but small towns hold secrets, excitement, and heroes to ride to the rescue. And who doesn't love a Texas cowboy?

Kathy Ivan

# **BOOKS BY KATHY IVAN**

[www.kathyivan.com/books.html](http://www.kathyivan.com/books.html)

## **TEXAS BOUDREAU BROTHERHOOD**

Rafe

Antonio

Brody

Ridge

Lucas

Heath

Shiloh

Chance

Derrick

Dane

Liam

Brian

Joshua

Ms. Patti

Nick (coming soon)

Texas Boudreau Brotherhood Series Box Set Books 1-3

Texas Boudreau Brotherhood Series Box Set Books 4-6  
(coming soon)

Texas Boudreau Brotherhood Series Box Set Books 7-9  
(coming soon)



**TEXAS BOUDREAU BROTHERHOOD AUDIO BOOKS**

Rafe

Antonio

Brody

Ridge

Lucas

Heath

Shiloh

Chance

Derrick

(more coming soon)

**NEW ORLEANS CONNECTION SERIES**

Desperate Choices

Connor's Gamble

Relentless Pursuit

Ultimate Betrayal

Keeping Secrets

Sex, Lies and Apple Pies

Deadly Justice

Wicked Obsession

Hidden Agenda

Spies Like Us

Fatal Intentions

New Orleans Connection Series Box Set: Books 1-3

New Orleans Connection Series Box Set: Books 4-7

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Saving Stephanie

Guarding Gabi

**LOVIN' LAS VEGAS SERIES**

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Crazy Vegas Love

Marriage, Vegas Style

A Virgin in Vegas

Vegas, Baby!

Yours For the Holidays

Match Made in Vegas

One Night in Vegas

Last Chance in Vegas

Lovin' Las Vegas (box set books 1-3)

**OTHER BOOKS BY KATHY IVAN**

Second Chances (Destiny's Desire Book #1)

Losing Cassie (Destiny's Desire Book #2)

## EDITORIAL REVIEWS

“Kathy Ivan’s books are addictive, you can’t read just one.”

—Susan Stoker, NYT Bestselling Author

“Kathy Ivan’s books give you everything you’re looking for and so much more.”

—Geri Foster, USA Today and NYT Bestselling Author of the  
Falcon Securities Series

“In Shiloh Springs, Kathy Ivan has crafted warm, engaging characters that will steal your heart and a mystery that will keep you reading to the very last page.”

—Barb Han, *USA TODAY* and Publisher’s Weekly Bestselling  
Author

“This is the first I have read from Kathy Ivan and it won’t be the last.”

—Night Owl Reviews

“I highly recommend *Desperate Choices*. Readers can’t go wrong here!”

—Melissa, Joyfully Reviewed

“I loved how the author wove a very intricate storyline with plenty of intriguing details that led to the final reveal...”

—Night Owl Reviews

*Desperate Choices*—Winner 2012 International Digital Award  
—Suspense

Desperate Choices—Best of Romance 2011 –Joyfully  
Reviewed

## **DEDICATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I always dedicate books to my mother, Betty Sullivan. She bought me my first Nancy Drew stories when I was young, scouring thrift stores and garage sales to add to my collection. Gave me my joy of reading and a love of romance.

I hear all the time from readers, telling me how much they adore Ms. Patti and Douglas from the Texas Boudreau Brotherhood series. (I do too!) They are the kind of parents we all wish we had in real life, and I wanted to write something special for those who care about these wonderful loving and caring parents who never considered their children to be “fosters”. That’s how this story evolved. I hope I did justice to this small slice of Shiloh Springs life and to your favorite Dad and Momma.

**More about Kathy and her books can be found at**

**WEBSITE:**

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**MS. PATTI**

# CHAPTER ONE

---

“DO YOU THINK she suspects?” Camilla stared at Heath, her hands twisting over and over in her lap. He’d wondered how long it would take before the stress of the party got to her. All his brothers’ fiancées and significant others were probably just as anxious as Camilla, wanting everything to go right, and still be a secret from his parents. Heath was willing to bet a month’s salary his momma and dad would figure it out, if they hadn’t already. But he didn’t know for sure they’d discovered the women’s subterfuge, so he’d played along.

“Momma is oblivious to everything y’all are plotting and scheming, at least for the moment. Personally, I think you’re gonna get caught. Somebody is liable to slip up and say something they shouldn’t, I guarantee. Hasn’t happened yet, but with all you ladies—and, yes, my brothers, too—the odds skew toward Momma figuring out y’all are up to something. Course, might be Dad who catches on first.”

“Liam said Douglas has so much on his plate right now with the new shopping center over in Santa Lucia, he hasn’t had time to think about anything else, much less figure out our plans. With Ms. Patti being in overprotective mode ever since he was in the hospital, we’re hoping that’ll keep her preoccupied for a little while. It’s important that the party is a surprise. They deserve to be pampered and treated special for this one day.”

Heath pulled Camilla closer against his side and brushed a soft kiss against her forehead. He couldn’t believe how much



his life had changed since meeting the woman he planned to spend the rest of his life with. Watching the little frown lines bracketing the corners of her lips, he brushed his thumb against them and felt her mouth curve upwards into a rueful smile. It was a good thing she couldn't see his face, or she'd have popped him good for rolling his eyes. His fiancée was a smart woman, but she didn't know his dad well enough yet to know the man multitasked like a maestro leading the Boston Philharmonic, and he never missed a thing. Heath had done more than his fair share of extra chores around the ranch, working off punishments from all the times he'd thought he'd pulled a fast one on his old man, only to get caught. His daddy was always one step ahead of him. *Always*. Heck, to this day he doubted he could manage to fool his old man. And his momma? It didn't matter how much she had on *her* plate, she wouldn't stay oblivious for long. He'd double-dog guarantee it.

“We want everything to go perfectly. Keeping your mother in on the basic plans, well, that's a given. She'd find it odd if she knew we were planning a party for the whole family, and she wasn't invited. A baby shower for Beth is the perfect excuse to get everybody in one place at the same time. I'm just worried she'll find out the real reason for the surprise celebration, and all our hard work will be for nothing. This party needs to go off without a hitch, and it has to be a surprise.”

“You ladies are doing a great job,” he murmured against her cheek as he brushed a kiss along Camilla's silken skin. Touching her had become his favorite pastime, and he couldn't

wait until they tied the knot, and he could spend every minute of every day making love to her. Sleeping beside her, waking to her beautiful smile. It was everything he wanted, and as far as he was concerned, it couldn't happen fast enough.

“Did you know this was all Beth's idea?” Camilla snuggled against his side before twining her fingers with his. “When she found out your momma and daddy's wedding was little more than the two of them with your Uncle Gator and his wife standing up before a justice of the peace, she suggested we throw them a vow renewal ceremony. Give your parents every romantic flourish, from flowers and wedding cake to a beautiful dress, and have them surrounded by friends and family. I think it's a wonderful idea. So romantic, and nobody deserves it more than your parents. I've never seen two people radiate love the way Douglas and Ms. Patti do, even after all their years together.” Camilla sighed, getting all misty-eyed. Heath expected he'd be helping Camilla with a plethora of schemes like this for years to come. As a writer, not only was she a hopeless romantic, but she believed in love and happily ever afters. She needed the people she cared about to have their very own happily ever after. How could he not love her?

“I don't get why y'all want it to be a surprise. I mean, what's the big deal? You tell them you're throwing them a big party so the whole family can watch them renew their vows. I bet they'd go along with it, especially Dad. He's a big old softie when it comes to making Momma happy.”

Camilla straightened in his arms and turned until she faced him. Seated beside him on the couch, they'd been watching a movie, the volume turned down as the end credits rolled.

Reaching up, she grazed her fingertips lightly against the scruff on his cheek, and he heard the raspy sound it made at her touch.

“You take after your daddy. You’ve made me happy every single day since we met.”

“It’s not hard since I adore you.”

“The feeling’s mutual, honey. I love you too. But we are throwing this party, and nobody, I mean *nobody*, better slip up and spill the beans or they’ll answer to me. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m not the one you need to worry about, though. Now Brody, he’s a blabbermouth. Couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it, which is why he’s been hanging around home and not going to the Big House. Beth’s acting as go-between, so he isn’t around for Momma to interrogate. She’d break him in under five minutes, guaranteed.”

“I know,” Camilla chuckled. “It’s driving Beth crazy. She knows the shower is a cover, a front for the real celebration. Although the shower is real too. We’re just having the actual shower the day after the vow renewal celebration. Nobody wants to take anything away from your momma and dad having their moment in the spotlight. Knowing how much your mother adores weddings, I hope we don’t disappoint her.”

“Trust me, sugar, nothing y’all are planning will disappoint Momma. She adores every one of you gals. You’re all part of the Boudreaus now, you’re family, and you know how Momma and Dad feel about family. As long as you’re happy, they’re happy. Just the fact you’re throwing this party for them

is going to mean the world to them both. I'm betting y'all are going to see Momma cry."

"As long as they're happy tears."

"Speaking of vows and ceremonies, have you decided on a date yet for ours?"

Camilla leaned forward and pressed a hard kiss against Heath's lips, and he responded, his mouth moving against hers. They were both a little breathless when she broke off the kiss. Cupping his face between her hands, she stared at him, and he could read the love in her gaze.

"I was thinking, maybe we could get married on Valentine's Day."

"Valentine's Day?"

"I know, I know, it's hokey and a cliché and has been done a million times, but—"

Heath placed a fingertip against her lips, stopping the ramble before it gained momentum. "Valentine's Day is perfect. Now, stop worrying, shut up and kiss me again."



RAFE WATCHED TESSA bend over, reach into the oven, and pull out a huge pan of something that smelled amazing. The scent alone made him drool and he couldn't wait to dig into whatever she was cooking. He waited long enough for her to put it on the counter before sliding his hands around her waist, pulled her against his chest, and nuzzled the side of her neck. He smiled when she leaned closer, melting in his arms.

“Afternoon, sweetheart.”

“I didn’t hear you come in.” Tessa turned in his arms and kissed him softly. “Give me a minute to cover this with aluminum foil, and I’ll fix you some lunch.”

“No hurry. That smells amazing, by the way.” He nodded toward the lasagna.

She chuckled. “Sorry, bub, you’re not getting any of that. It’s for the party. I still have two more of those to bake today. I’m starting to think I was temporarily insane, offering to make all this food.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve been cooking for the last two days. Are you sure there’s nothing I can help with?” He made the offer, knowing she’d turn him down, just as she had the last three times he’d offered. Though she grumbled about all the work, he knew she secretly loved being able to contribute toward the super-secret party being thrown for his parents.

“I’ve got this. Did three large pans of chicken and cheesy rice yesterday, so it’s ready to go. Two trays of meatballs and three trays of lasagna, too. All I have left are the baked hams.”

“Plural?”

She nodded. “I’m doing two spiral cut hams, one with brown sugar and pineapple chutney. The other will have a spicy orange and soy glaze. After that, I’m done with the main dishes.”

Leaning against the counter, he watched Tessa futzing around the kitchen, but stopped her when she took out the covered plate from the refrigerator. “Sweetheart, I can heat up

my own lunch. Why don't you take five minutes and put your feet up? You're pushing yourself too hard, planning this surprise for my parents for weeks. I'll bring you something cold to drink. Take a break, you've earned it."

"Everybody else is working as hard as I am," she protested. "Maggie's handling all the decorations, including the flowers. Trust me, she's got her hands full dealing with vendors who aren't cooperating with our quick timeframe. Honestly, how hard is it to get flowers? It's not like we're ordering hothouse orchids or some exotic blooms which only grow on the side of the highest mountain one time a year." Tessa rubbed the cold soda bottle against her forehead. "Forgive my grouchiness. I think Maggie's frustration is rubbing off on me."

"I'm glad we took our time with our own wedding arrangements." Rafe sat beside Tessa and pulled her close against his side, brushing a kiss against her forehead. "Even though we had to postpone twice, everything was perfect."

Her brilliant smile warmed his heart. "And I want this big day to be spectacular too. Your parents deserve nothing less."

Rafe smiled, wanting to indulge his pretty wife. Between teaching at the elementary school, helping her extremely pregnant sister who was mid-construction on a new house with her husband—his brother Brody—babysitting his favorite niece, Jamie, and now helping arrange a surprise vow renewal ceremony and anniversary party for his parents, Tessa had her hands full to overflowing. He wondered how she was holding everything together so well.

“No worries, sweetheart. I already told my brothers we aren’t having an official bachelor party for Dad since the whole wedding is a surprise. We’re going meet at Dane’s, get together to play poker, drink a few beers. Told Dad it was our way of having a little quality guy time, since the ladies were all having an official baby shower for Beth. But that’s it, I swear. Since it’s something we do semi-regularly, Dad won’t suspect a thing.”

“Y’all have fun. I know how you get when you Boudreau boys get together. No strippers, big guy. That’s where I put my foot down. The only naked woman you’re allowed to see anymore is me.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Tessa sounded like she meant it, and he couldn’t be happier at her little display of jealousy.

“No strippers, got it.”

“Good.”

## CHAPTER TWO

---

**P**ATRICIA BOUDREAU CLIMBED from the cab of the pickup truck, letting out a soft oomph when her feet hit the ground. Most of the time she didn't mind being on the short side, but when your sons and your husband are relative giants in comparison, it made things difficult when she had to borrow a vehicle. Her precious Cadillac Escalade was at Frank's shop, because she'd noticed a sponginess to the brakes when she'd been driving into town from the Big House. Frank promised to get to it ASAP, though she'd assured him there was no hurry. She'd had a custom foot rail installed when she bought it, which made it easier to get in and out of the Escalade. Liam's truck wasn't built for a vertically challenged female.

She'd called Liam to pick her up, and he'd promptly showed up in his shiny new truck. Candy apple red, it still had a factory-fresh gleam and that lovely new car smell. When he'd heard about the Escalade, he'd insisted on loaning it to her, said he'd drive his old pickup back to the work site. Being the mother of a whole passel of boys had its privileges after all.

If she hadn't been swamped with work and clients, she'd have turned him down and waited until Frank fixed hers. But the housing market in Texas had exploded in the last several months, and work had been crazy. She was busier than she'd been in years, with a significant lack of available housing and an enormous pool of buyers willing to pay exorbitant prices. She was no dummy and knew eventually the real estate bubble



would burst, but in the meantime, she planned to take advantage of all the opportunities presented by the ever-shrinking pool of available properties.

It wasn't like Shiloh Springs or even the surrounding counties had an overabundance of properties hitting the market. Most people, once they moved to this neck of the woods, planted roots and stayed. With Austin being a little over an hour away, lots of folks were willing to commute if they found the right house, which she specialized in. Her company was one of the top real estate offices in Central Texas and ranked in the top ten in the whole state.

Tugging the strap of her handbag higher on her shoulder, she walked toward the house she'd come to look at. The owner had called the day before, asking her to come check the place out, and give him a realistic figure of its market value in its current condition. He'd inherited the property six months earlier from his elderly uncle and with the unexpected windfall had planned to relocate to Shiloh Springs. At least until he'd gotten a promotion with his company, which would take him out of the country for the next two years. It didn't make sense to have the house sit empty for that long, and he didn't want to deal with the hassle of fixing up and renting the place. Add in the fact that since property prices were bringing in record highs, he wanted to sell, and wanted the best realtor to handle the transaction.

*Smart man, because Boudreau Realty is the best.*

She studied the house, viewing it with a practiced eye. All the facts about the property were outlined on the printed sheet

she'd stuffed in her purse before she left the Big House earlier that morning, but she wanted to look at it aside from all the facts and figures. While details were important, she needed to get a *feel* for the place. Each home had its own unique character and personality, like a living, breathing being—at least to her.

The aura of the house oozed neglect. Not surprising. The older gentleman who'd lived there hadn't been able to keep up with maintaining the basics, like paint and foundation. She knew he'd utilized a yard service for mowing the patch of grass surrounding the house, and keeping the bushes trimmed. Logically, a lot of the value was in the land itself, not the house. That was simply the fact of living in Central Texas, especially if you planned on raising crops or animals. This place boasted slightly over five acres, so while it wouldn't be a huge ranch, it would be a nice place for a family who wanted a bit of land and privacy.

The siding on the home had once been a pristine white but had faded with age to almost a creamy yellow color. Brick red shutters framed the first-floor windows. Luckily, all the shutters appeared to be intact and attached. That wasn't always the case and finding replacements for older ones usually meant having them custom made.

The text message alert on her cell phone pinged, and she dug in her purse for the phone. Usually, she'd have ignored it while she was evaluating a property, but since Douglas hadn't been out of the hospital long, she needed to make sure it wasn't him. She'd be the first to admit she was a worrywart when it came to her hubby. Seeing him lying in a hospital bed

frightened her more than she wanted to admit, and it was something she wouldn't soon forget.

Reading the text, she sighed. It was from Frank, telling her the brake master cylinder was shot and needed replacing. He had to order the part. Since it was Friday afternoon, he'd try to get one by Saturday, but the likelihood was iffy. If he couldn't find one locally, he'd have to get one from the city, and it would be Monday before she'd get her baby back.

She shot a quick text back, telling him to go ahead and do what he could. Liam wouldn't mind her keeping his truck for an extra couple of days. He had his old pickup, and he'd scream bloody murder if she even suggested swapping with him for the weekend.

Shoving the phone back into her bag, she stepped onto the house's front porch and smiled. It wrapped across the entire length of the front and seemed in surprisingly decent shape. Of course, she'd have the company's handyman come and check it over, but it would be a good selling feature. People loved being able to have a front porch where they could sit in the evenings and relax after a hectic day. Add a porch swing and buyers would eat it up.

Opening the front door with the key her client overnighted her, she stepped inside a living time capsule. Directly in front of the door, a wide staircase led upstairs. Not the best feng shui, but not a deal killer either. Nothing appeared to have been touched in decades. Even the furniture looked like something from a bygone era. Good quality pieces, albeit out of style, and covered with sheets. The walls were a soft robin's

egg blue and looked like they hadn't been painted since the furniture was new. Faded lace curtains, yellowed with age, covered the front-facing windows, sheer enough to let through diffused sunlight. Definitely a woman's touch, though she knew the previous owner's wife had passed away a year ago.

On the right side of the first floor was the formal dining room. Smaller than she'd expected, it would hold a table and maybe six or eight chairs. Nowadays, a lot of people didn't even bother having a separate dining area. With the windows providing a lot of natural light, she could easily see the space being used as an office. Might consider staging it like that, since lots of folks worked from home nowadays.

The kitchen, like the living room, hadn't been updated in a long time. On the plus side, it was a good size and the layout worked. Solid wood cabinets were an added bonus. They could be painted a vivid white, brightening up the whole kitchen. Add granite or quartz countertops, upgrade the appliances, and it would become a decent kitchen.

The rest of the house was pretty much what she expected. Four bedrooms, the primary, largest one, on the main floor and three others upstairs. Two and a half bathrooms. For a house this size, having an additional half bath was another bonus, and upped the selling value. The main bedroom was roomier than she'd expected, although it could use more closet space. The main bathroom wasn't attached, but it was next door to the bedroom, so she could point out to potential buyers that a quick door installation from the bathroom into the bedroom could be done for minimal cost, and they'd have an ensuite. At least it had double sinks and a decent-sized shower.

Heading downstairs, she pulled her cell phone from her bag and dictated notes on her findings. She liked talking about a property after she'd done a visual run through, while her thoughts were fresh. Speaking aloud each selling point, and the things that needed refreshing—like paint and flooring—seemed to set the details in her memory. It also gave her a reminder of what she found.

Stepping onto the porch, she locked the front door, and dropped the key into her bag, along with her phone. She'd have to remember to have Serena bring a lock box to put on the front door, so workmen would have access. Glancing around again, she smiled. The land around the house had been sodded with grass, bushes wrapped around both sides of the house, starting at the edge of the front porch, and lining the outer walls. They'd obviously been well-tended, and the grass still looked lush and green. The new owner had made an agreement with the small local company who'd worked for his uncle, because he hadn't wanted the property to appear abandoned and encourage squatters or vagrants. *Smart.*

Past the landscaped lawn, the land was dotted with trees. Mostly large oaks, the kind found all over the Lone Star State. They grew naturally in the Texas soil and spread their branches in a huge canopy over the dirt. It was a good plot of land, with enough acreage for an industrious family to make it their own. Neighbors aplenty, but not so close as to be all up in their business. She chuckled. Definitely another selling point.

Four bedroom, two and a half bath homes in this market, even with the commute to Austin, would garner a hefty price. Probably multiple offers if the current owner was willing to

make a few of the upgrades she'd suggest. She wasn't sure how he'd feel about that though, since he'd seemed anxious to unload the place. All she could do was make the suggestions and leave the final decision in his hands. If it was her property, she'd make a few revisions, knock down a couple of walls, and bring the old beauty into the twenty-first century. Hopefully potential buyers would see the same strong bones and possibilities she saw and revive the old girl.

Stepping off the porch, she continued making her way around the side of the house, inspecting the base of the house and the soil beneath it. Some older homes tended to have foundation issues. Texas soil was tricky to build on, and foundation issues were common. Luckily, the home had a pier and beam foundation, which she much preferred. She hated dealing with the slab foundations so popular in Texas with new construction. They were a pain in the backside when it came to repairs.

Continuing around to the back of the house, she studied the wooden steps leading from the kitchen door out to the backyard. The area screamed for a nice big deck, but it wasn't up to her. Wasn't her house, she wasn't going to live there. Unless, she pondered, one of her boys might want to take on the challenge of bringing the old gal back to her former glory. It was something to consider.

On either side of the kitchen door were window boxes full of dead withered leaves and stems. Guess the company who took care of the lawn and bushes hadn't bothered with those. She imagined they'd once been filled with fresh herbs, maybe some brightly colored flowers. This close to the kitchen, it

would be easy to simply throw open the window and pick what they needed for whatever recipe they were cooking and, with a few snips, have fragrant, fresh herbs.

About a hundred yards from the house, she spotted a large outbuilding, bigger than a small gardening shed. Oversized, the previous owner had probably used it for storage. It wasn't big enough for a garage, and too far from the house to be used as one anyway. Pulling out her phone again, she dictated a quick note that the house did not have a garage. Lots of homes in Texas didn't, so it wasn't that unusual. Those that did tended to convert them into extra living space if they were attached to the main structure.

Inhaling deeply, she smiled. It was a gorgeous day. The sun shone brightly in the vibrant blue sky, though she knew that wouldn't last long. The forecast called for storms to roll through later in the afternoon, some possibly severe. There had been talk of large hail too. But for now, she'd take advantage of the beautiful weather and finish checking out the property. Thank goodness she'd put on her tennis shoes before she left the office.

Might as well look at the outbuilding, see what it contained, if anything, and what needed to be hauled away. Hitching up her shoulder strap, she headed for the large shed. When she reached it, she frowned, noticing there wasn't any type of fastening on the door. The only thing holding it closed was a slide-type bracket, far too flimsy to be used on an outer door. It was the kind you'd usually see inside. If there was anything even remotely valuable in the shed, it begged to be stolen.

Pulling the door open, she stepped up on the wobbly piece of plywood acting as a wooden incline and walked inside. Once again, an overwhelming sense of neglect spread through the structure. The interior was dark and smelled musty and almost...moldy? She wondered if there was a water supply someplace close by. The floor consisted of sheets of plywood, laid end-to-end, some overlapping in places. Might indicate flooring issues, maybe rot. Might also mean the building wasn't good for anything except tearing down.

Two of the walls were covered with floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves, most empty. That was good news; it meant less stuff to haul to the dump. Along the back wall sat a dilapidated push lawnmower with the blade attachment bent and unusable. A leaf blower leaned forlornly in the corner, cobwebs decorating its casing. A rake and a shovel lay on the plywood floor, discarded and alone.

The wall on the right was covered in water stains leading downward from the roof in several places. Probably the source of the moldy smell, she mused. She lifted her phone, needing to make a note for the inspector to see whether the water damage warranted saving the outbuilding, or whether the whole thing needed to be torn down. Calling up the camera function, she clicked a quick picture.

Stomping her foot against the plywood, she heard a cracking sound. Frowning, she turned on the flashlight app, shining it toward her feet. Jagged cracks fissured in thick lines across the aged wood. There was a bouncy, spongy feeling beneath her feet. Definitely not safe. Moving away from the weakened spot, she stepped to the side, grimacing at the piles



of old grass shavings beneath the shelves. There was also evidence of scattered critter nests, meaning rodents made the old building their home at one point. A shudder raced through her. Hopefully they were long gone. She wasn't afraid of a few mice; she seen more than her fair share of the little buggers living on a ranch. Didn't mean she wanted to meet them face-to-face today.

Glancing upward, she noted the single exposed lightbulb with a pull string. Though there was diffused light from the sunshine, the interior of the shed was still dark, and it couldn't hurt to have more light. Reaching for the string, she muttered a curse when she couldn't quite reach it. Sometimes being short was bloody inconvenient. Douglas wouldn't have had a problem reaching the cord. Neither would any of her sons. Shoot, even Nica could have pulled the stupid thing without issue.

Glaring at the cord, she rose on her tiptoes, stretching her arm as far as it would reach. Her fingertips teased against the little metal fastening at the end, causing it to swing back and forth. She huffed out a frustrated breath. Pulling her purse off her shoulder, she laid it on the floor, up against the wall so it was out of the way. She was a Boudreau, and no stupid piece of rope was going to get the best of her.

Taking a deep breath, she bent her knees and jumped toward the hanging string. Her fingers caught on the end, and she pulled. Light painted across every surface of the shed, and she landed on her feet. A loud crack sounded right before she felt the plywood beneath her give way, sliding sideways the moment she touched down. Thrown off balance, arms

windmilling, she landed hard on her back, the breath knocked out of her. Holding still, she grimaced at the pain.

*Well, that was stupid. I should know better than to think I'm Wonder Woman, able to do anything. Ow!*

Struggling to sit, she glared at the offending piece of wood which had skidded a couple of feet away, leaving a gap beneath the floor. She couldn't help noticing the rather large hole revealed by the missing piece of flooring.

*Great, one more reason to tear this thing down.*

She looked around, getting her bearings on where she'd landed. Unfortunately, it was on the opposite side of the huge hole in the floor from where she'd laid her purse.

And her phone.

“Looks like I'm on my own. Can't call the cavalry to ride to the rescue.” She chuckled at the picture of all her grown sons saddling up and riding to the rescue, grimacing when pain shot through her lower back. “Ugh, no more laughing. Now, let's get up and get out of here.”

Easing onto her side, she made it to her hands and knees, gritting her teeth to keep from yelling at the pain in her backside and from her own stupidity. Putting weight on her right foot, she collapsed onto the ground when her ankle couldn't hold her weight. She thumped back into a sitting position and reached for her ankle, noting it had swollen to almost double in size. Touching the skin, she winced at the shock of pain shooting through it.

Shaking her head, she leaned back against the wall of the shed, and closed her eyes. “It’s going to be a long trip back to the truck.”

## CHAPTER THREE

---

MAGGIE WALKED THROUGH the kitchen door, her hands laden with gallon jugs filled with tea and lemonade and plunked them onto the table against the wall. The ladies had agreed to meet at *How Sweet It Is*, Jill Monroe's bakery. She'd allowed them to use the kitchen area in the back once the morning rush was over. Which was a good thing, because planning this secret celebration was proving to be a massive undertaking.

"Have you heard from Ms. Patti?" Tina grabbed a container of sour cream and dumped it into a large bowl, then added a second. A couple of packages of onion soup mix quickly joined it, and she stirred, making a face at the gloopy mess. Personally, she couldn't stand the stuff, but she'd been informed by her fiancé that it was a must-have at Boudreau gatherings, along with a gazillion different chips for dipping. She'd make sure there were some cut vegetables to go along with the dip too. Couldn't hurt to have healthy stuff along with junk food.

"No. I thought she'd be here by now. You know how much she loves this kind of thing. Especially since everything we're doing is for Beth's baby shower. She's probably just running behind. She mentioned going into the office for a couple of hours earlier this morning, but I expected her to be here already." Camilla added another trinket to the goody bags she worked on and pulled the drawstring taut. They'd chosen gold and silver bags, both to tie into the supposed baby shower theme, and for the surprise vow renewal. The gold ones were

for the wedding, and the silver ones contained baby-related goodies.

“Think I should call her, see if she’s on her way?”

“No, let’s give her a little more time. You know how she gets when she’s working on a real estate deal. I’m sure everything’s fine, and she’ll be here any minute.”

Camilla, Maggie, Tina, and Jill, girlfriends to several of the Boudreau brothers, were working on the baby shower decorations and food, while the rest of the ladies were chugging away at the church recreational area, getting everything settled for the surprise vow renewal. Decorating the pews, arranging the flowers and ribbons and bows and all the bling. Sounded like she’d dodged a bullet. She’d rather deal with the food anytime.

Keeping everything a secret from Ms. Patti and Douglas hadn’t been easy, and after talking with Heath, Camilla said she wasn’t sure they’d succeeded. After all, Ms. Patti seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to everything going on in Shiloh Springs. Plus, she had her own personal network of spies in town who kept her informed on everything happening in their tight-knit community. That was a big reason they’d counted on Maggie doing a lot of the leg work, because she lived across the county line, and could keep Ms. Patti or Douglas from finding out what the actual goal of this party was. At least that’s what everybody hoped.

“How’re things going on this end?” Maggie grabbed one of the oatmeal raisin cookies off the plate at Tina’s elbow, and grinned before she shoved half of it in her mouth.

“We’re pretty much on schedule here. Jill’s managed to do the cake for the baby shower. It’s over there.” Tessa pointed toward a sheet cake, decorated with the cutest baby motif, in various shades of blue. Brody and Beth had both wanted to know the gender of the baby right away, so everybody in the family already knew they were having a bouncing Boudreau baby boy. “Jill finished the cake for the wedding too. Just in case Ms. Patti sees it and asks about it, she put a little sign on the bottom with a different couple’s name. It’s in the walk-in cooler if you want to look.”

“Of course, I want to see.” Maggie pulled open the door to the cooler, and immediately squealed her approval. Camilla looked over at Tina and gave her a thumb’s up.

When Jill walked into the kitchen, she spied the open cooler door. “Checking out my latest masterpiece?”

“Girlfriend, that cake is ah-maz-ing!” Maggie gave her a fist bump. “Ms. Patti is going to be over the moon.”

“I hope so. I want it to be perfect, after everything she’s done for me. I mean, I wouldn’t have this place if it wasn’t for her.” Jill looked around the kitchen. “Where is she? I thought she’d be here by now.”

“She told me she was going to the office for a bit. Something to do with a new listing for an out-of-town client. I’m sure she’ll show up any minute.”

“I’m shocked at how realistic you’ve made the gazebo look. And to recreate it in cake? How did you do it?” Maggie peered closer at the mini replica of Ms. Patti’s secret garden. The detail was exquisite, right down to the climbing roses

along the walls, each petal looking like they'd be silky to the touch. The domed roof covered a small version of what the girls called the wishing well in the center.

“I don't think anybody's going to be fooled for a second by the phony name on this cake, especially if Ms. Patti catches a glimpse of it.” Maggie jerked a thumb toward the cake. “I mean, it looks exactly like her gazebo. Only family knows about it. Are you really going to tell her you make *her* gazebo for somebody else's cake, Jill?”

“Well, we'll have to make sure she doesn't come back into the refrigerator then. Y'all have to help me keep her out.”

“Good luck with that, girlfriend,” Tina muttered under her breath. She knew Ms. Patti had an eagle eye and never missed a thing. Nothing got past the woman. *Nothing*. The fact that they'd managed to keep everything about the party on the down low so far was pretty much a miracle. If they could only get through today, they'd be home free, because tomorrow was the big day.

Things had been rushed, because Douglas and Ms. Patti's anniversary had managed to almost sneak up on them, until Beth came up with the brilliant idea of throwing them a vow renewal ceremony. Tina was all for it, especially after hearing that they'd basically had a quickie marriage by a justice of the peace with only two witnesses. While it was probably beautiful in its own way, she wondered if Ms. Patti ever regretted not having at least a ceremony with friends and family surrounding her while she spoke her vows to the man she adored.

And it was evident Douglas and Ms. Patti loved each other deeply. Every look, every touch was filled with emotion, along with the fact that Douglas cherished everything about his wife, and vice versa. She'd never seen two people so in love, even after thirty-five years of marriage. Well, almost thirty-five. One more day to reach that milestone. Tina smiled, hoping she and Chance would still be this much in love when they reached their thirty-fifth.

“Isn't anybody else getting concerned that Ms. Patti isn't here yet? Besides me, I mean.” Maggie's gaze met Tina's, and she nodded slowly.

“You're right. Even if she stopped to deal with a house issue, she'd have been here by now. Or at least called. I'm gonna try her cell.” Pulling her phone from her back pocket, Tina dialed her future mother-in-law's number, only to have it go to voice mail. “Hmm, that's not like her. Unless she's with a client, she always answers.”

“Tina, trying calling the church. Maybe she stopped in there, even though she wasn't supposed to head over there. If she's figured out what's going on, she might have gone there to bust us.”

Tina quickly dialed Tessa's number, who answered on the first ring. Ms. Patti hadn't shown up at the church, which was both a good and a bad thing. The knot in the center of her stomach grew when she realized nobody had seen or heard from Ms. Patti all day. Tessa said she'd call Rafe and let him know to check on his mom.

Now all they could do was wait—and worry.





“HEY, BABE, WHAT’S up?”

Rafe tapped his fingertips against the steering wheel, smiling for the first time that afternoon. Seeing Tessa’s name on his Bluetooth screen was a lot nicer than getting another call from the office. It was supposed to be his day off, yet he’d been bombarded with every little nitpicking thing under the sun. Stuff that really didn’t require law enforcement intervention, but people seemed to have lost their ever-loving minds today.

“Have you talked to your momma?”

“No, I haven’t. I thought she was supposed to be meeting everybody at the bakery.”

“She was. I ended up heading over to the church first to drop off the food so it could go in the big freezer. Ms. Patti told Tina she needed to take care of something for a new client first thing this morning, but she’d be there as soon as she finished. Only she hasn’t shown up, and she’s not answering her phone.”

Rafe’s body tensed at Tessa’s words. That wasn’t good. His momma always answered her phone.

“When’s the last time you tried calling her?”

“I’ve been trying for the last half hour. Maggie tried calling too. Rafe, I’m trying not to think anything’s wrong, but it’s not like your mother to not show up where she’s expected. When she says she’ll be someplace, she’ll be there. Especially

something like the party we're planning. She thinks it's for her new grandbaby."

"Let me try and see if I can contact her. You still at the church?"

"Yes. Half the ladies are here, and the other half are at the bakery getting things ready. Honestly, honey, I'm tempted to get in my car and drive over to Ms. Patti's office."

"Stay put, sweetheart. I'm not far from there. I'll swing by, see if her car is in the parking lot. Don't worry, Red, we'll get this sorted out. Maybe she accidentally turned off the ringer. You know how it gets sometimes, things get crazy at her office, and she gets busy and forgets to turn it back on. Don't panic and try to keep the other ladies from doing anything stupid."

He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, wishing he could take them back.

"Rafe Boudreau, we aren't the ones who do foolish things. Or should I start listing all the *stupid* things you and your brothers have done?"

He winced before adding hurriedly, "Let's not. I'll call you back as soon as I know something. Love you, Red."

Tessa huffed out a laugh. "I love you too. I'll let you know if one of us hears from your mother."

"Thanks."

If he'd been in his official cruiser, he'd have turned on lights and sirens, because an insidious feeling of dread crept into his gut. Probably why he'd been in a lousy mood all day

and let all the afternoon's mishaps get to him. Taking a deep breath, he slammed his foot against the accelerator, and sped toward Boudreau Realty.

Pulling into the parking lot, he noted two cars close to the front, but his mother's white Escalade was visibly absent. One of the two belonged to the company's office manager, Elizabeth. He guessed the other probably belonged to a potential client.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his gut, he dialed his mother's number, fear crawling into the pit of his stomach when it went straight to voice mail. The women were right to be worried. It wasn't like his momma to be out of touch for so long. As much as he didn't want to, he knew he didn't have a choice. He dialed his dad's number.

"Afternoon, Rafe."

"Hey, Dad. Have you talked to Momma lately?"

"Not since this morning. Why?"

Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the headrest. "It's probably nothing. The ladies haven't been able to contact her."

There was a long pause before his dad spoke. "She mentioned she might stop by the office, and then go out to see a potential new listing before heading to Jill's bakery. Have you checked her office?"

"I'm sitting out front right now. Only two cars in front, one of them is Elizabeth's. I'm going to check in with her, see if

she's heard anything, but wanted to check with you first, just in case."

"Let me make a couple of calls, and then I'm heading into town. If I hear anything, I'll call you ASAP. You do the same, got it?"

"Yes, sir." Rafe felt his lips quirk up in a smile at his dad's tone. It wouldn't matter what he told him, he knew there'd be no stopping his father from coming into town and finding his wife. The man worshipped the ground she walked on, everybody knew it.

"Son...be careful."

"I will, Dad. Don't worry, it's probably nothing. She might have turned off her phone and forgot to turn it back on. Chances are good she'll show up at the bakery before you get halfway to Shiloh Springs."

"Hope so. Call me if you hear anything." Rafe heard the subtle emphasis on the word anything.

Rafe disconnected the call, climbed from his car, and headed inside Boudreau Realty. He was worried enough he didn't care that he might be interrupting a meeting between Elizabeth and clients. They'd surely understand the urgency of the situation, the need to find his momma.

Elizabeth sat with a middle-aged couple, neither of whom Rafe recognized. A stack of paperwork sat between them, and Rafe immediately recognized the rental agreement since he'd seen hundreds of them both here and at the Big House when

his mother brought work home from the office. Looked like Shiloh Springs might be getting new neighbors.

Elizabeth glanced up when Rafe walked through the door and immediately stood. “What’s wrong?”

Guess he wasn’t good at hiding his emotions today, but then his mother had never been missing for this long before. “I’m looking for my mother. Have you seen her today?”

Elizabeth shook her head, before excusing herself from the clients, telling them to read the documents carefully before signing. Walking closer to Rafe, she leaned in and asked, “She wasn’t here when I got in around eight. I’ve been here the whole day, and had this meeting scheduled with the Schindler’s for this afternoon. Want me to check her desk, see if there’s anything that might indicate where she’s at?”

“Good idea.”

Rafe walked with Elizabeth to the large oak desk at the back of the office, the one his mother used nearly every day. Papers were stacked neatly in the in and out boxes, and several folders were lined up perfectly in the center of her desk, but there weren’t any sticky notes, and nothing was written in her appointment book/daily planner to indicate she’d had plans for today. Which only left the statement his dad made about Momma wanting to look at a new listing for an out-of-town client. Too bad there wasn’t anything here to indicate who the mystery client might be or where his property was.

“I could try calling her...”

It was Rafe's turn to shake his head. "We've all been calling, and she's not picking up. Goes straight to voice mail."

"That's not like Patricia. She never turns her phone off when she's in the field. She's a stickler for that, has all the agents keep their phones turned on and have the ringers set, so they can be contacted at a moment's notice. Rafe, hon, is there anything I can do? I can wrap things up with the Schindlers quickly, and I'll do whatever I can to help find your momma."

"I appreciate that, Elizabeth, but right now I need everybody to stay where they are. What I don't need is the whole family, their fiancées, and girlfriends running around town causing chaos. Dad's on his way into town, and we'll find her. I've got a couple of places to check."

"Please, call me the minute you find her. I'm going to worry my head off until I hear back from you."

Rafe pulled Elizabeth into a quick hug. She'd worked for his mother for years, and she was as close as family to all the Boudreau boys, so he knew she would worry, exactly as she said.

"Don't tell anybody Momma's missing. The last thing we need is to start a panic."

"I understand. Like I said, you call me. Otherwise, I'm gonna show up on your doorstep in the middle of the night, because I won't be able to sleep a wink knowing Patricia isn't home, safe and sound."

"I promise. Go on back to your clients and get them to sign on the dotted line."

She laughed at his lame joke. “Will do. Good luck, Mr. Sheriff.”

With a wry smile, he walked out of Boudreau Realty, no closer to finding his mother than when he’d started.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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**M**S. PATTI GAVE herself a couple of minutes to have a small pity party, long enough to feel sorry for herself, and realize she was an idiot. Somehow, she needed to get her purse, which held the keys to the truck, and get outside. Glancing around the shed, her eyes landed on the abandoned shovel leaning forlornly against the wooden wall. It would work as a type of hiking stick, something she could use for support to get her to the truck. Fortunately, Liam's new baby had an automatic transmission, so she'd be able to maneuver a bit and work the pedals with her left foot, because one way or another, she needed to get out of this decrepit shed and back to civilization.

Pretty sure her ankle wasn't broken, but there was definitely a serious sprain happening, and the first place she'd head was to the doctor's office. With Beth's party coming up tomorrow, she wasn't about to let a little thing like a sprained ankle keep her from celebrating the upcoming birth of her grandson.

First though, she needed to get to the shovel. After a bit of trial and effort, she figured out it was either try to scoot across the plywood floor an inch at a time or do a modified type of army crawl on her belly. Yep, belly crawl for the win. She wasn't about to add splinters in her tush to the list of ailments when she saw the doc. Her backside was probably already covered with bruises from the earlier fall. She wasn't looking forward to explaining her stupid stunt of jumping for a light



cord because she was so dang short. There was only so much humiliation a gal could take in one day.

Rolling onto her stomach, she managed to cover about a foot's distance before realizing she had a bigger problem. The shifted plywood had uncovered a huge hole beneath the shed. Unfortunately, it had uncovered something else a bit more sinister. A distinct rattling sound drifted up from the hole, and she froze. She knew exactly what that sound meant, and she didn't want to come face-to-face with its owner.

The door appeared a thousand miles away, but she was no quitter. Raising a whole houseful of boys from adolescence to adulthood taught her to persevere and have ingenuity. The bigger question was what Douglas would do, because he always—always—came up with the right answer.

“Douglas, this would be a great time for you to swoop in like a knight in shining armor and save the damsel in distress.” She laughed, picturing her tall, handsome husband wearing a suit of armor and strolling through the doorway of the dilapidated shed. Cocking her head to the side, she shrugged at the image. “Works for me.”

The shovel still out of reach, she stretched out, reaching toward the rake. It looked like it was a few inches closer anyway. Her fingertips touched the metal tines, and the rake inched closer, though not enough to easily grasp it. Her fingers brushed against it again, and she scooped a smidge closer to it, listening intently for the rattling sound. Nothing. Didn't mean the snake had moved on, simply that it had settled down—for the moment.

Finally able to wrap her hand around the rake, she yanked it toward her, breathing heavily. She still had to figure out how to get to the other side of the shed, grab her purse and her phone, and hightail it to the truck. Wouldn't be easy, because her ankle was throbbing with every pulse beat, but she wasn't about to stay here a minute longer than she had to. Nope, not with a rattler underneath the shed and time rapidly slipping past. She wasn't about to be stuck here after dark. Nobody knew she'd stopped to check out the property on her way to meet the ladies for the party preparation. They wouldn't know to look for her here. She'd printed out all the information from her home computer and had shut it down after she finished. Not the brightest move, but more habit than anything. She always turned off her home computer when she was finished working.

Her thoughts drifted to her daughter-in-law, the whole reason for the surprise baby shower. Beth was due any day now. Patti couldn't wait for the baby to be born. A new generation of Boudreaus to carry on the family name. Like most of her sons, Brody had legally changed his name to Boudreau as soon as he could after he turned eighteen. It had become quite the family tradition, with Rafe being the first to want to be claimed as a Boudreau. Though she loved Jamie with her whole heart, there was something about being there when a new baby came into the world, being a part of its life from the very beginning, and she was ready to spoil her new grandson rotten. All part of a grandmother's duty and responsibility.

“Yo, in the house. Anybody here?”

At first she wondered if she was hallucinating. Hearing things, or people, who weren't really there, but just in case, she wasn't about to let them leave, not without trying to get their attention.

"I'm here," she shouted as loud as she could, hoping and praying whoever was there would hear her. "Help, please!"

"Who's there? And where are you?"

"The shed. I'm in the shed. I'm stuck."

"Hang on, I'm coming, ma'am."

The sound of thudding feet pounding against the dry earth coming close had her heart racing. Didn't matter who it was, at least somebody was outside who could help her get outta this shed and back to Liam's truck. When the door to the shed flew open, a body was silhouetted against the bright sunshine.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" When he stepped forward into the shed, she realized she didn't recognize him. Standing about five foot eleven or thereabouts, it was hard to tell since she was sitting on her backside on the plywood flooring. He had light to medium brown hair. In the low light of the shed, she couldn't see what color his eyes were, but his expression was a mixture of concern and curiosity. Probably around the same age as her sons, so late twenties to maybe early thirties. Whoever he was, he wasn't local to Shiloh Springs, or if he was, he'd just moved there. Either way, she was glad to see him.

Gesturing toward her ankle, she answered his question. "Not really doing great. Twisted it something fierce. Can't put

any weight on it. Think you can help me out to my truck?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, and can you hand me my purse and my phone? I need to call my husband, let him know I’m okay. I’m surprised he hasn’t called out the cavalry or organized a search party yet.” She smiled at the other man’s confused look. “He’s a tad overprotective.”

“Gotcha.” He picked up her purse and handed it to her, then reached for her phone. “I don’t think you’re going to be making any calls with this.” He turned the screen toward her, and she frowned at the shattered screen. Darn it, he was right, she doubted it would even turn on.

“Let’s get you out of here and someplace where you can get that ankle taken care of ASAP.”

She sighed as he slid his arms beneath her thighs and under her back, lifting her with ease, and she clutched her purse in one hand and her shattered phone in the other as he turned and headed for the door.

“Be careful. I heard a rattler under the shed, and I don’t know if there might be more around.”

He froze for a few seconds before continuing to walk out of the building. She raised her face toward the sun, feeling the warmth on her skin. Drawing in a deep breath, she turned her head and got her first good look at her rescuer. She was right; she didn’t recognize him, but he did seem somehow familiar. Maybe she’d seen him in town and hadn’t paid a lot of attention.

“Thank you again for your help, Mister...” She deliberately trailed off, waiting for him to fill in the blank.

“Ferguson. Stan Ferguson.”

“I’m Patricia Boudreau, but most folks around here call me Ms. Patti.”

He stopped walking and looked down at her. Suddenly, a huge grin spread across his face, and he chuckled. “You’re Ms. Patti? I’ve heard quite a bit about you since I got here. It seems you’re an institution in Shiloh Springs, at least according to my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Beverly Ferguson. She and my dad own a place just down the road.” He jerked his chin to the left, though it wasn’t necessary. Beverly and her spouse had lived in Shiloh Springs for years and attended the same church as the Boudreaus. She knew them well; they’d been out to the Big House numerous times. William had been a county judge, and he’d just recently retired, though he was still full of energy. He’d told her they planned to travel once Beverly retired from her school board position, which was still several months away.

“I know Beverly and William. How’s she doing?”

Stan drew in a deep breath and kept walking toward the front porch of the house. “Not so good at the moment. Dad’s in the hospital over in Santa Lucia, and she’s staying there while the docs try and figure out what’s wrong with him. She called and asked me to come keep an eye on their place, take care of the animals and such, while he’s in the hospital.”

“Oh, no. Is there anything I can do?”

Stan shook his head. “I think you’re gonna have your hands full taking care of yourself, Ms. Boudreau. That looks like a nasty sprain you’ve got there. Doubt you’ll be doing much of anything except sitting with your leg elevated for a few days. I’d like to get it wrapped before heading into town, if you don’t mind. I’m an EMT in Amarillo, at least in my day job, when I’m not shoveling manure out of my mother’s stalls.” His grin had her smiling back, though the pain in her ankle was throbbing worse than any toothache. Every step he took was agonizing for her, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

“If you could get me to my truck, I can—”

“No can do, Ms. Boudreau. What I’m gonna do is this. I am going to take you to the front porch of this house and get some medical supplies out of my trunk.” He nodded toward a dark blue sedan parked not far from her truck. “I’m going to wrap your ankle and then we’re going to get you to a hospital.”

“I don’t think a hospital is necessary, Mr. Ferguson.”

“Stan.”

“I think I’ll be okay if we go to the emergency clinic. Doc Jennings can do x-rays and call Douglas, my husband, or one of my boys to pick me up.”

“Doc Jennings? I thought he retired, and you had somebody new running things, at least that’s what my mom said. Tell you what, Ms. Boudreau. Let me get a better look at

your ankle. If it's only a sprain, we'll go with your plan. If it looks like there might be torn ligaments or there's the possibility of it being broken, we'll head to the hospital. Deal?"

She huffed out a breath. "Deal."

Reaching the porch, he gently lowered her onto the top step. She couldn't hide her wince of pain as her foot landed on the second step. Glancing down, she noted the darkening bruises, along with the massive swelling. Maybe Stan was right, and she needed to head to the emergency room.

"Give me a second, I'll be right back."

"No problem."

Sprinting toward his car, he popped the trunk, pulled out a red canvas bag, and headed back toward her. Kneeling down in front of her, he started to reach for her ankle, but waited until she nodded her approval. Better to get it over with than prolong the inevitable. He kept his touch light and professional, but when he moved her ankle, she barely bit back a scream at the pain that shot through her foot.

"I'm sorry, I know it hurts. Hang in there, I'm almost done, and then I'll secure it with some athletic sports tape I have to keep it stable until we can get you looked at, okay?"

She nodded, afraid if she unclenched her jaw, she'd be screaming at the top of her lungs. Not only did she hurt, but she was embarrassed for doing something so foolish, so stupid. Maybe she deserved to hurt after pulling a dumb stunt like jumping for a light cord. She should have known better. She

wasn't a spring chicken anymore, more like the old gray goose. And if Douglas heard her talking like that, he'd straighten her out quick. She smiled at the thought.

Stan finished wrapping the athletic tape around her ankle, and she had to admit it felt better. At least she didn't feel like she had burning hot knives being shoved into her with every movement.

"That feels better. Thank you."

"Good. Now, I'm going to carry you to the car, and we'll get you sorted out in no time, Ms. Boudreau."

"I think you'd best call me Ms. Patti, since you're doing me a huge favor by rescuing me. You're a regular knight in shining armor, Stan. A hero."

Color flooded his cheeks at her words, and she wondered if he wasn't used to being complimented. She would've thought Beverly would dote on her son, but then again neither Beverly nor William spoke about Stan. Yes, she knew they had one child, a son, but from what she could remember they were estranged and had been for a long time. He hadn't moved with them to Shiloh Springs all those years ago, so the rift was a longstanding one. With everything that had been going on with her boys and their women lately, she hadn't had time to catch up with her friends. Maybe they'd mended fences, and that's why Beverly called him to help out while William was in the hospital. She made a mental note to get in touch with Beverly as soon as possible, to see if there was anything she needed.

"I assure you, ma'am, I'm nobody's hero. I'm the farthest thing from heroic of anybody you've ever met." His gaze met



hers, steady and unwavering. “But I’m trying. Taking things one day at a time, because I want to be the person, the man, my family deserves.”

“Well, today, you are my hero, Stan. Now, let’s get out of here. I’ve got places to go and a baby shower to finish plans for.”

He eased her onto the car seat and gently helped her lift her injured leg into the car. While there was a twinge of pain, she didn’t have the sharp agony like earlier.

“You rest, Ms. Boudreau—Ms. Patti—” he amended at her squinty-eyed look, and added, “The doctors will have you good as new in no time.”

“Thank you, Stan. Oh, can I borrow your cell phone? I want to let my husband know where I’m at before he rounds up all my sons to look for me.”

“Um, about that, I left it at my mother’s place. I didn’t realize I hadn’t stuck it in my pocket until about half an hour ago. Sorry.”

Darn. Oh well, surely Douglas wouldn’t worry yet. He knew she was going to be with the ladies, getting things ready for Beth’s baby shower. They probably hadn’t even missed her yet. One quick phone call when she got to Doc Jennings’ emergency clinic and the crisis would be averted. Leaning her head back against the headrest, she closed her eyes, the soothing motion of the tires against the asphalt lulling her into a dreamless sleep within minutes.



DOUGLAS FOUGHT AGAINST the pool of fear that had settled deep inside him after Rafe's call. One of his greatest fears was losing his precious wife. The simple thought of her not being in his life? Inconceivable. You might as well stick a knife in his chest and finish him, because there would be no going on without her.

Climbing into the cab of his work truck, he gunned the engine, and pointed the hood toward town, praying for all he was worth. He drew in a deep breath, knowing he needed to stay calm, not aggravate his blood pressure. After his health scare earlier this year, where they'd thought he'd had a heart attack, the doc had placed specific demands in place—including not allowing himself to get overexcited. But how'd he expect him to remain calm when his wife wasn't able to be located?

Stomping his foot down harder on the accelerator, he watched the needle on the speedometer climb ever upward. He didn't care, his one concern, his one focus was finding his Patricia.

Scenes from their life together seemed to play through his thoughts. He could remember the day he'd met her. The moment he'd seen her something had broken loose inside him, and he'd felt freer than he'd ever felt before. The feelings he'd had for another woman, one he'd thought he'd loved, disappeared in an instant, because he couldn't see anybody but Patricia Mackenzie with her glorious blonde hair and blue eyes. She'd stolen his breath with their first meeting, and still did to this day.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that settled over him like a shroud. He refused to believe he wouldn't find her. And she'd swat his arm the way she always did, and fuss because everybody had been worried. Hoped against hope it was simply a dead cell phone. Or she'd run out of gas. Or she was helping somebody in town and simply hadn't thought about contacting anybody.

Except she would've called someone. His beautiful wife wouldn't have left the ladies hanging without letting them know she would be late. For her not to show up? Every worst-case scenario raced through his mind, and didn't that scare him half to death? Shiloh Springs was a safe place. Didn't have the kind of crimes seen mostly in the bigger cities, but more and more people were moving into the area. Drugs and guns moved across the border with increasing frequency. No matter how hard they worked to keep their town a haven for its citizens, bad stuff happened.

But not to his wife. Not his Patricia.

His gaze strayed to his cell, beside him on the seat. Grabbing it up, he punched the speed dial for his wife. Listened to the ringing and sighed when it switched to voice mail.

"Honey, the boys are getting worried coz they can't get hold of you. Gimme a call, so I can set their minds at ease." He paused for a moment before adding, "Mine too. Love you."

Disconnecting the call, he immediately dialed Rafe.

"Dad."

“Have you heard anything yet?”

*Please say yes. Please say you've heard from your momma and she's fine and this has all been a colossal misunderstanding and she's waiting for me to reach town.*

“Sorry, Dad. I'm contacting my brothers and we're organizing a search party. We will find her, I promise.”

Douglas drew in a deep breath, and eased up on the accelerator as he drew closer to town. Traffic was getting thicker, and as much as he wanted to shove the pedal to the floor, he refused to put other lives in danger.

“Where do you need me, son? I'm on the outskirts of town now, so I can meet you wherever you need.”

“Can you think of anyplace Momma mentioned going? An errand she meant to run? Somebody she'd planned to visit with and had put off?”

“Not that I can think of. Wait, she did mention a couple of days ago that she wanted to check on Edna. Said she'd been down with the flu, and she wanted to stop by and see if she needed help at the bed and breakfast. You think she might have stopped there on her way to the bakery?”

“I'm thinking we should check any possibilities. I've got a lead and I'm headed in the opposite direction, so why don't you plan to head over to the B&B and see if Momma stopped by there?”

Hope blossomed inside Douglas' chest. At least he had someplace to start. The not knowing, feeling so helpless had

been eating away at him like an insidious cancer, and he latched onto the possibility he might find his wife at the B&B.

“I’m on it, son. I’ll call you as soon as I get there. You hear anything, though, you call me. Immediately.” He made his tone firm, resolute. Making sure there was no misunderstanding, he wasn’t about to be left out of the search process. Patricia was his wife, and he meant to be there when they found her.

“I’ll call, Dad. Stay safe.”

“You too.”

“Love you, Dad. We’ll find her.”

Douglas felt the wetness behind his lids and cleared his throat to be able to speak past the sudden lump there.

“Love you, too, Rafe. Always.”

Disconnecting the call, Douglas started praying again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

“OKAY, GUYS, WE’VE got a situation.” Rafe watched his brothers’ faces, at least those standing in front of his desk at the sheriff’s station. The others were on the phone, waiting to hear what Rafe was calling about.

“What’s up, bro?” Heath leaned against the doorjamb, one ankle crossed over the other, his posture relaxed, like he didn’t have a care in the world. Which was probably true because he’d spent the morning with Camilla. Antonio and Chance stood in his office too. Lucas and Brody occupied the two chairs in front of his desk, and all the testosterone in the room made the hairs on the back of Rafe’s neck rise.

“Yeah, Rafe, what’s so urgent you’ve got everybody here, either in person or on the phone?” Ridge’s voice came through loud and clear, though Rafe knew he was in his truck, on the way into town. Shiloh was with Ridge, which accounted for two more of his brothers. He hadn’t been able to get hold of Liam yet; he was on the job site, but he’d left a message for him to call ASAP. Dane was out of town with Destiny, though they were due back any minute. Nobody was about to miss the festivities planned for the next day. Joshua was on his way from the Big House, but he was on the call. That pretty much accounted for everybody, and he needed them all, because he had to break the news to them that their momma was missing.

He expected his dad to walk through the doors any minute, and it killed him inside to have to give him the news that he hadn’t been able to find her. Yet. Rafe wasn’t about to give up,

and he knew once his brothers found out, they'd be scouring the entire county until they found her, alive and kicking and probably ready to give them heck for wasting their time looking for her. At least, he hoped so.

“Guys, we’ve got a problem.” He paused and drew in a deep breath, knowing it was best to just put it out there, without sugar coating the issue. “Momma’s missing.”

Everyone started talking at once, questions flying. “What do you mean Momma’s missing? I talked to her this morning and everything was fine.” Ridge’s voice seemed overly loud through the phone’s speaker. Of course, he was practically shouting to be heard over the rest of the rabble.

“What time did you talk to her? Did she mention anything about where she was going, what her plans were?” Rafe slid into professional mode, knowing he had to remain calm and collected, even though he was nearly as frantic as his brothers appeared. Wouldn’t do anybody any good if he went off half-cocked; that wasn’t the way to work a case.

“Only thing she said was she was meeting up with the ladies to work on Beth’s baby shower. Are you telling us she didn’t get there?”

Rafe sighed. “Nobody’s seen or talked to her since this morning, as far as I’ve been able to determine. She mentioned a house she was going to stop by and look at before heading to Jill’s to meet up with the gals. Unfortunately, she didn’t leave any information about exactly where this house is or who she’s working with. Elizabeth hasn’t seen her or talked with her.”

“That’s not like her. She always lets the office know where she’s going to be. I’m assuming you can’t get her on her cell?” Antonio’s dark gaze met Rafe’s, and he shook his head.

“No answer. Several of us have tried, including Dad, and there’s been no answer.”

His brothers started speaking amongst themselves, and he could hear Ridge and Shiloh’s voices through the phone’s speaker, though they weren’t talking loudly. Rafe rubbed a hand against his forehead, worry eating away at him. His first knee jerk reaction when he’d heard from Tessa that nobody been able to contact his momma was she’d simply turned off her phone and forgot to turn it back on. But as one hour and then two passed and still no contact? Definitely not like his momma.

Sally Anne peaked around Heath’s shoulder, since he still blocked the doorway to the office. “Sheriff, your brother, Liam’s, on line two. Said you called and wanted to speak to him stat.”

“Thanks.” Putting the other call on hold, Rafe answered line two, putting it on speaker. “Liam, any chance you’ve talked to Momma this morning?”

“Sure did,” he answered. “She had some car trouble on the way to town. Frank’s working on her car and I loaned her my new truck. Why?”

“Did she happen to tell you where she was headed?”

“Lemme think a sec. She mentioned going to look at a property, something about a new listing. Some guy’s uncle



passed and left him a house and a bit of land. Momma planned to stop and take a look so she could give him advice on what he needed to fix up if he wanted to sell it for top dollar. Rafe, what's going on?"

"Nobody's been able to get in contact with Momma since this morning. Looks like you're the last person to talk with her."

"Wait, she was supposed to go to Jill's bakery after she looked at the new property. She never showed?"

"Nobody's seen her. None of the ladies have been able to contact her. Dad either."

"Bro, I'm leaving the site now. I can be there in less than an hour. What can I do?"

"I've rounded up everybody. The ladies are going to stay put at Jill's and at the church, in case Momma shows up there. The rest of us are going to spread out and look for her. I'll have Sally Anne check to see who died in the last several months, see who owned property—"

"Haskins. Josiah Haskins passed away about six or seven months ago. I remember Dad mentioning something about him having a heart attack. Dad said he didn't have any relatives that lived close. If I remember right, he owned a bit of property over off Meadow Creek Road." Brody shrugged when Rafe stared at him. "What? I pay attention when people talk. Can I help it if y'all can't retain facts five minutes after you hear them?" His brother's quick grin eased some of the tension in the room.

“Lucas, you and Brody check the clinic, see if Doc Jennings or Doc Stevens have seen or heard anything.”

“We’re on it.” Both men rose and headed out the door, Heath moving aside to let them pass.

“Heath, call Frank at the garage, see if he’s talked to Momma since this morning. It’s a longshot, but it’s something. The rest of us will start asking around town, to see if anybody’s seen or heard from her in the last few hours. I’ll head over to the Haskins’ place, see if there’s any sign that Momma’s been there. Anybody hears anything, call here and let Sally Anne know. She can get hold of me immediately.”

The rest of his brothers quickly left to start their searches, while Rafe talked to Ridge and Shiloh and let them know to head back to Santa Lucia and see if their hospital might have had Momma admitted. The thought made his gut tighten, but better she be in the hospital than a worse alternative.

“Rafe, honey, what can I do? I need to help.”

“Sally Anne, the best thing you can do is man the phones. My brothers will be checking in, and I need you here. If you want, make a few calls. Check the diner, Gracie’s place. Anywhere Momma might have been this morning. You hear anything, you radio me right away, okay?”

Impulsively, he wrapped his arms around Sally Anne and gave her a quick hug. She squeezed him back and visibly straightened, her head going back, and she gave him a jaunty salute. “You’ve got it, boss. Now, go on, get outta here. Find your momma and bring her home safe.”

Without another word, Rafe walked through the front door and out to his car, praying the whole time. The town couldn't afford to lose their beloved Ms. Patti, but more importantly, he couldn't afford to lose her. It wasn't an option he was willing to face.

“Hang on, Momma. We'll find you.”



A HEAVINESS HUNG over her, a feeling of lethargy invading her body. Struggling to open her eyes, which felt like lead weights kept them closed, she finally managed, squinting against the bright lights overhead. She raised her hand, managing to block some of the brightness down to a manageable glare, and looked around. Stark white walls on all sides, with a small window with vertical blinds greeted her perusal.

Looking down, she realized she was in a cotton gown, the kind given to patients admitted to the hospital. It didn't look like she was in the Shiloh Springs emergency clinic, which was where Stan was supposed to drive her. Scooting up in the bed, she pressed the button to elevate the head, raising it until she was sitting up. Then she hit the call button for the nurse or somebody who could answer her questions. Like where was she and why had she been admitted.

The door to her room swung inward and Stan Ferguson stuck his head inside, his expression of concern genuine. He smiled when he saw her sitting upright in the bed.

“Ms. Patti, I'm so glad you're awake. I've gotta tell you, you scared the living daylights out of me, passing out like that.”

“I passed out?” Why couldn’t she remember that? She remembered Stan finding her in the shed and helping her, wrapping her ankle, which now that she thought about it throbbed with a dull ache. He’d agreed to drive her to the emergency clinic, so she could see Doc Jennings, get him to take a look at her ankle.

“Yes, ma’am. I couldn’t wake you up, and your pulse rate was exceedingly fast, so I used my best judgment and brought you to the hospital.”

“Which one?”

“Mercy General, Williamson County. I started to go to the hospital in Santa Lucia but there was a pretty bad accident on I-45, and they were routing patients there. This seemed the smarter choice.”

“Thank you. I appreciate everything you’ve done to help me, Stan. I’ll make sure and let your parents know how much you’ve done for me too.”

“That’s not necessary. My mother’s got her hands full dealing with Dad at the moment, and I was glad I could help you. I did try calling the number for your house, once I got here, but I got voice mail, so I left a message. I’m sure your family’s looking for you.”

She almost rolled her eyes at that statement. If she knew her husband and her boys, not to mention all the women, they probably had an old-fashioned posse out searching every inch of Shiloh Springs, especially since her phone wasn’t working. Being incommunicado for this long, they’d probably gone straight into panic mode. She needed to call Douglas or one of

the boys and let them know what happened and where she was. The only problem was all of their numbers were programmed into her phone, which no longer worked, and she didn't know them by memory.

“Can you call the sheriff's office in Shiloh Springs? Talk to my son, Rafe. Let him know what's going on, where I am, so nobody panics. Or if you get me the number, I'll call.”

Before he could answer, a nurse walked in, a big smile on her face. Dressed in blue scrubs, her hair pulled up into a messy bun, she quickly rolled a vital signs machine over next to the bed. “Afternoon, Mrs. Boudreau. I'm Gloria, and I'm the shift nurse on this part of the floor for today. You gave this young man quite a scare.” Lifting up a blood pressure cuff, she wrapped it around Ms. Patti's arm and started it inflating. A quick flick of the digital thermometer took her temp, and the machine beeped as the cuff deflated.

“I had a bit of a scare myself, Gloria. Everything look normal?”

“Your vitals are stable. The doctor in the emergency room wanted you to be admitted since you lost consciousness. They also took x-rays of your ankle, and we're waiting for the radiologist to read them. If there's a fracture, they'll call in an orthopedic specialist.”

She drew in a ragged breath. “How long do you think that'll take? I'm going to need to contact my family, let them know where I am.”

“It shouldn't be too long. As for contacting your family, there's a phone beside your bed. Dial 9 for an outside line. In

the meantime, if you need anything, push the call button, and I'll come back."

With a quick pat on her hand, Gloria left, leaving her with Stan, who shifted from one foot to the other, his hands clasped in front of him. She wasn't sure what had him so antsy, but she'd figure it out. The debt she owed him needed to be paid, and she'd do whatever she could to ensure he knew a Boudreau's thanks.

"I'm...I'll go and look up the phone number for the sheriff's office and give your son a call. I bet he's looking for you right now. I waited to try and track anybody down, because I wanted to make sure you'd be okay. No need for anybody to panic when they don't need to, right?"

"I appreciate your help, Stan. When you talk to my son, please tell him to have Douglas call me. He's going to worry if he doesn't hear from me soon."

"Let me take care of that right away." Stan turned toward the door, but she had another question for him, one that had been gnawing at her subconscious for a while.

"Why were you at the house today? I'm glad you were, but I'm curious. Nobody lives there, hasn't since the owner passed."

A flush rushed into Stan's cheeks, and he looked at the floor, almost like a bashful kid. All he needed was to scuff his toes along the tile, and he'd look like a big five-year-old. She couldn't help smiling at the image.

“My mom mentioned the house had been empty for a bit and thought maybe the new owner might be interested in selling. I had a few extra minutes, and thought I’d take a look around the place from the outside. I know my folks and I haven’t been close for a long time, but they’re getting on in years, and I hopefully have stopped being a jackass. I thought maybe while I’m here in Shiloh Springs, I might set down some roots. Come home.”

“I’m going to be representing the owner, who wants to sell. Let me get out of the hospital and talk with him, and we’ll see what we can do to make a deal. If this house doesn’t work out, I’ll find you something. I promise.”

A light of what looked like hope lit his eyes, and Ms. Patti had the sudden urge to pull him into a hug. Too bad he was all the way across the room, and she couldn’t get out of bed. Not yet anyway. But she owed him, and she’d make sure he got what he deserved.

“I’d like that, ma’am. I didn’t get much of a look, but what I did see seemed like a fine place. Good bones. And I’m not afraid of a little hard work to fix the old gal right up.” He smiled and gave her a brief two-fingered salute. “Let me get hold of your son. I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.”

“Thanks again, Stan. I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

He studied her before placing his cowboy hat atop his head. “I’m sure you’d have figured out a plan, Ms. Patti. I haven’t got a single doubt you’d have managed just fine.”

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the hospital room. With a sigh, she leaned back against the pillow and decided to rest while she could before the chaos that was her family descended on the hospital as soon as they heard she was there.

It was good to be loved.



## CHAPTER SIX

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**B**ETH TIED ANOTHER bow to the church pew, making sure it was perfectly centered with the white roses and baby's breath displayed. The gold and silver theme throughout the church looked lovely, classy, and dignified, perfect for Ms. Patti's vow renewal ceremony. She wanted everything to be perfect. Ms. Patti was the one person in her life she adored unconditionally. Brody's mother had accepted her and Jamie into the family without hesitation, without question. Even though she'd brought danger directly to their doorstep with her ex-husband's depravity, Ms. Patti and Douglas had stood by her, protecting Jamie as if she was their biological granddaughter.

Now it was Beth's turn to pay them back for all their kindness and generosity. Straightening, she placed her hands at the small of her back and glanced down at her distended, pregnant belly. Only a few more weeks, and her son would come into the world and join the amazing family that was the Boudreaus. Brody practically waited on her hand and foot, not wanting her to lift a finger. Which was kind of nice, and nothing like her first pregnancy with Jamie. Her ex could barely spare the time to speak to her, much less help her out around the house, even when she'd been as big as a whale toward the end. Oh, well, she'd found her Prince Charming, and she was never, ever leaving him or Shiloh Springs.

There were still several pews needing decoration, and she moved to the next, gathering the white and silver trimmed

ribbon and twisting it around the end. The side door opened, and Tessa walked in carrying another box filled with flowers. Maggie, her soon-to-be sister-in-law, oversaw getting the flowers for the ceremony, and she'd come through big time. There were the white roses with baby's breath and ferns for greenery. The flowers at the front were white roses, red roses, pink camellias, red and white chrysanthemums, gardenias, and daisies. The scents were intoxicating, filling the front of the church with a sweetness that made Beth smile. Everything was perfect. Except for one thing.

Ms. Patti was missing.

Oh, she wasn't supposed to be here at the church. She was supposed to be at Jill's Bakery, helping with the baby shower. The baby shower Beth wasn't supposed to know about. Thinking about fooling Ms. Patti made her chuckle.

"What are you laughing about, Sis?"

"Imagining Ms. Patti's face when she finds out not only that the baby shower isn't a surprise, but that her vow renewal ceremony is. If anyone deserves to have a celebration of love, it is Douglas and Ms. Patti. I hope Brody and I are as happy as his parents when we've been married as long as they have."

"I wish that for Rafe and me too. We've got a couple of winners."

"Yes we do, and I've never been happier. Now if we'd only get word that Ms. Patti is okay, everything will be perfect." Beth rubbed the small of her back, and decided she needed to sit for a minute or two. For some reason, she was extra tired today. If they weren't working on the wedding,

she'd have stayed home and taken a nap. But this was too important. She could sleep later.

“You okay?” Tessa knelt beside her, placing her hand on Beth's knee.

“I'm fine. Just a bit tired. Junior is flipping around like a jumping bean today, and he's wearing his mommy out.”

“Let me take over the flowers for a bit. I've already got the food in the big freezer. You take a break, go put your feet up. I've got your back.”

Beth took a deep breath and maneuvered her massive belly up from a seated position, and felt a sharp pain wrack her body. “Oh, that was some kick, kiddo. Let's give Mommy a break, okay?”

“You alright? You look a little pale.”

“I'm fine. I think I'm going to take your advice and go put my feet up for a couple of minutes.”

Tessa studied her closely for a minute, before nodding slowly. “Take it easy. I remember toward the end when you were pregnant with Jamie, you couldn't seem to sit still. Always up and going and doing. You've got a ton of help, so let us handle the heavy lifting. You can be the supervisor for today, okay?”

Beth grinned. “You mean I'm queen for the day? I get to order y'all around?”

“I didn't say that, but let's go with it, Your Majesty.” Tessa grinned and Beth felt a lightness in her chest she'd been missing for a while. Her sister was a true joy to be around, and

she'd really come into her own personality after moving to Shiloh Springs and meeting Rafe. He was the best thing to happen to her sister in—well, forever.

“I’m going to find my throne and sit my big fat—” Beth broke off as another pain shot through her, and she grabbed her stomach, moaning at the sensation. Uh oh. “Not now,” she whispered. “It’s too soon.”

“Beth? Beth!” Tessa raced to her side, helping ease her down onto the front pew. “Honey, are you okay?”

“I don’t know. Either Junior’s kicking harder than he ever has, or...” She trailed off, knowing her sister would put two and two together and figure out she was in labor.

“That’s it. We’re going to call your doctor and find out what he wants us to do. Lean on me,” Tessa added, sliding an arm around Beth’s waist, and Beth looped her arm around her sister’s shoulder. She couldn’t be going into labor. It was too soon. There was too much going on right now. The party, Ms. Patti being missing. Nope, she could not be going into labor. She breathed out slowly, hoping it was simply Braxton-Hicks and not the real thing. But she had a feeling time wasn’t on her side, and she was about to become a mommy for the second time, whether she was ready or not.



RAFE DROVE TOWARD the Haskin’s place, his foot pushing hard against the accelerator. Everybody was out actively looking for Momma. The women were making calls to everybody in town they could think of that might have seen or heard from her. Dad and his brothers were doing their own searches.

Somebody, somewhere, had to find her. Anything less was unacceptable. He'd decided to head back home, which was the last place anybody had seen her. He figured he'd check out the lead about the Haskin's place, then head to the Big House and do a check of her computer history, see what she'd been working on. Maybe he'd be able to figure out where she'd been headed if it wasn't the Haskin's place, before she was supposed to head to Jill's bakery.

While he drove, every possible scenario played through his mind. The Boudreaus had faced more than their fair share of dangerous situations and devious people in the past few years. Though it was a longshot, it was possible somebody with a grudge might have targeted his momma, wanting a little payback. His gut clenched at the thought of his momma at the mercy of some maniac. Though they didn't have a lot of crime like he'd seen in the bigger cities like Dallas and Houston, there were bad people even in small towns. He did his best to keep Shiloh Springs a safe place, but sometimes bad things happened no matter what precautions you took.

When his phone rang, he grabbed it, not bothering to look at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Is this Sheriff Boudreau? A lady named Sally Anne gave me this number when I called the station."

"I'm Sheriff Boudreau. How can I help you?"

"My name's Stan Ferguson. I wanted to let you know that I have your mother—"

"What do you mean you have my mother? What have you done with her?" Rafe practically spat out the words, his fingers

itching to wrap themselves around this unknown man's neck. Probably would have if he'd been there in the flesh.

“No, no, nothing like that! I didn't make myself clear. I found your mother earlier today. She'd hurt her ankle and couldn't walk, and I helped her. I was driving her to the emergency clinic there in Shiloh Springs when she passed out. I thought it best to take her to the hospital.”

Rafe let out the first truly deep breath he'd taken in hours. Momma was okay, that's what mattered.

“She's hurt?”

“They don't think it's anything serious. When I found her, she'd twisted or sprained her ankle pretty bad, couldn't walk or bear weight on it. I've got some EMT experience, so I wrapped it as best I could. Told her she needed to go to a hospital to be checked out, but she insisted I take her to the emergency clinic, but when she blacked out, I figured it was better she got seen at a hospital. Right now, she's at Mercy General.”

“She been admitted?”

“For observation only. They're waiting for the x-rays to come back, to see if she broke the ankle. She wanted me to make sure and get hold of you or her husband. She smashed her phone and couldn't make any calls.” The other man chuckled before adding, “When we got here at the hospital, she wanted to call but couldn't remember anybody's numbers because they were all programmed into her phone. Something I totally understand because I wouldn't remember anybody's

numbers either. It's too easy to program them and then just hit speed dial."

Rafe scrubbed a hand across his face, eased the car to the side of the road, and put it into park. The sense of relief flooding him made him almost giddy. The fear that ate at him most of the afternoon dissipated with the knowledge his momma was okay. Now he needed to call off the manhunt—or was it woman hunt?—and let the family know where she was and that she was safe and sound.

"You have my thanks, Mr. Ferguson. You have no idea how important my mother is, not only to our family but to the community. We've been looking for her for the last several hours, and honestly? My thoughts were starting to head into the worst-case scenario territory."

"I've heard stories about your mother for years, Mr. Boudreau. My parents talk about Ms. Patti all the time. I'm happy I could help. I'm going to stick around here until somebody from the family gets here, if you don't mind?"

"I appreciate that, Ferguson." Rafe paused for a second when the name clicked. "Any relation to William and Beverly Ferguson?"

"Yeah, I'm their black sheep son, the one who gave them so much heartache and grief. Fortunately, my parents are the loving and forgiving sort, and we're on the road to patching up our relationship. I've got a lot of fences to mend, but I'm working on it."

"Your parents are good people."

“They are, and I’ve caused them a lot of heartache. I’m trying to make amends, which is part of the reason I’m in Shiloh Springs now. Watching their place while Dad’s in the hospital in Austin.”

“Let me know if there’s anything you need, Ferguson. Me or one of my brothers will do our best to help you out.”

“Thanks for the offer, Mr. Boudreau.”

“Might as well call me Rafe. I have the feeling we’ll be seeing a lot of you in the future, Ferguson. Momma will make sure of that. And we appreciate you rescuing her and getting her to a doctor right away. Let her know we’re on our way, and we’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Will do. She’s in room 423A. See you when you get here.”

Rafe disconnected the call and stared at the dashboard of his cruiser, tempted to run with lights and siren to get to the hospital as soon as possible, because this was his mother, not some stranger he was thinking about. Instead, he hit the speed dial to call his dad.

“Rafe, tell me you’ve heard something?”

“Momma’s fine, Dad. She’s at Mercy General with a sprained ankle. They’re waiting for x-rays to see if it’s broken.”

“Why didn’t she call? How’d she get hurt?” The gruffness in his dad’s voice didn’t fool Rafe. He knew the man was close to tears, the emotional upheaval of not knowing where his wife might be, whether she was hurt or worse taking its toll. After



having his own health issues not that long ago, Rafe worried the stress of his wife being missing might exacerbate his heart issues.

“I’m not sure of all the details. I got a call from the Ferguson’s son. Apparently, he found Momma after she’d hurt her ankle, and took her for medical help.” Rafe deliberately didn’t tell his dad about her blacking out. Better he found that out after they got to the hospital.

“William and Beverly’s boy?”

“Yes. He’s in Shiloh Springs watching over their place while William’s in the hospital. Last I heard they’re getting ready to move him to a rehab facility, to work on getting his strength back.”

“Good. You said Mercy General? I’m gonna head that way \_\_\_”

“Where are you now? Let me come pick up you and drive you there.”

“I’m in town, close to Edna’s B&B.”

Which meant his dad was at least thirty to forty minutes in the opposite direction from him, and he’d have to backtrack to pick up him.

“Stay where you are, and I’ll pick you up, and we’ll head straight to the hospital.”

“Son, I can drive myself.”

“I know you can, Dad, but I think it’s best we go together. You can be with Momma, and I’ll get a chance to talk with Mr.

Ferguson, get a few more details. Plus, there's no sense in both of us driving to the same place separately."

His dad sighed. "Fine, I'll wait here, but you'd best hurry. You momma needs me." Rafe could almost hear the unspoken "and I need her."

"I'm on my way."

Disconnecting the call, Rafe quickly typed a group text to his brothers, letting them know to call off the search, that Momma was safe, and for them to let all the women know so they'd stop worrying. He sent another quick text to Tessa, to let her know he was heading to the hospital.

Within seconds, his phone exploded with text messages, which he ignored. He didn't have time to spend on the phone answering everyone individually. They'd all get the message soon enough. Smiling, he put the car in gear and made a U-turn, headed back toward town, listening to the pinging as the texts kept coming.

The lightness in his heart was reflected in his smile as he realized once again how much his family loved each other, and especially loved the woman who was their touchstone. Their lynchpin. Everything was going to be alright, because Momma had been found.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**B**ETH PLACED A hand on her distended stomach, the seatbelt firmly secured beneath her burgeoning belly. Thankfully, Tessa had driven her car today instead of bringing Rafe's pickup, because there was no way she'd have been able to heft her bulk high enough to get into the cab of the truck. Taking a deep breath, she breathed out slowly through her mouth, barely watching the scenery whiz past the window. Tessa was muttering under her breath, something about the worst possible timing, that she wasn't ready, and she'd have to call Brody. Beth agreed with the lousy timing part, but calling Brody seemed a little premature.

Fortunately, the pains had stopped once she got into her sister's car, so maybe it had been false labor and not the real thing back at the church.

She'd had several episodes of Braxton Hicks contractions when she'd been pregnant with Jamie, and she prayed that was the case here. While she couldn't wait to hold her newborn son in her arms, watch Brody's face when he became a daddy, today wasn't the day for it to happen. Not with Ms. Patti missing, and especially not with the renewal celebration scheduled for tomorrow. Everybody had worked so hard to bring the big event into fruition and she'd be darned if she ruined it.

"Junior, do Mommy a favor. Settle down and stay calm. You need to wait a couple more days, okay? Mommy loves you very much, but your timing needs a little work, kiddo."

“Hang in there, Sis. I’ll get you to the clinic as fast as I can.”

“Tessa, stop worrying. Everything’s going to be fine. I told you, I think it’s false labor. Probably all the stress of getting stuff finished, and the whole not knowing where Ms. Patti is at that’s making me anxious. I haven’t had any pain since we left the church.”

Tessa glanced in her direction, a frown across her face. “Really? Because you keep rubbing your belly. You’ve been doing it almost nonstop since you got in the car.”

“I swear, I’m not in pain. As for rubbing my tummy, I didn’t realize I was doing it, although I’ve caught myself doing it a lot when I talk to Junior. Habit, I guess. Besides, it makes me feel closer to him.”

Tessa blew out a breath, her bangs ruffling against her forehead. “I know I’m being paranoid, but I want everything to go smoothly with this birth. Evan was such a jerk to me when Jamie was born, I felt kind of cheated of the whole being an aunt for the first time experience. With this little one, I know it’s going to be different. Brody is so excited about becoming a dad and he’s being wonderful about the whole thing.”

*My ex-husband, Evan, was a big fat jerk. I only wish I’d opened my eyes earlier and realized what a monster he was, instead of being willfully blind. But my ex is out of the picture for good, may he rot in prison.* “Tessa, I’m so sorry for the way he treated you.”

“He treated you worse. You had to live with him every day. You are one of the strongest women I’ve ever met, and I’m so proud of you. You didn’t allow him to crush your spirit or your courage, and you reached out with both hands to create a new beginning for yourself and for Jamie. We’ve always been family, but now we’re part of something more. Something bigger and better than I could have ever imagined, and we are loved. It’s a wonderful feeling, isn’t it?” Tessa smiled, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. “I think our parents are looking down and smiling, knowing we both have men in our lives who cherish us.”

Beth reached up and wiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks. “Now look what you’ve done. You made me cry, darn it.”

“Good. Got your mind off the labor pains too, didn’t I?” Tessa grinned as she pulled up to the front door of the emergency clinic. “Hang tight, I’m going inside to get help.”

“Nonsense.” Beth’s hand fumbled with the handle, and she opened the door, then clicked the seatbelt release before swinging her feet out onto the blacktop. “I’m perfectly capable of walking inside. Get a grip, Sis, for both our sakes.”

Tessa hurried around the front of the car in time to slide an arm around Beth’s waist. Beth rolled her eyes but allowed her sister to grab the clinic’s front door and swing it open before waddling through and heading for the receptionist’s desk. She felt guilty taking up the doctor’s time when it wasn’t an emergency, but Tessa hadn’t even given her a chance to call her obstetrician. Oh, well, she’d humor her and talk to the

doctor, who'd tell them everything was fine, the baby was just being acrobatic, and to go and see her personal doc if she had any more pains.

“My sister started having pains and needs to see the doctor right away. The baby isn't due for another couple of weeks, so something might be wrong.” Tessa spoke so fast Beth had trouble understanding her. The receptionist nodded her head and picked up the phone, relaying the info to whoever was on the other end of the line. Beth shook her head and placed her hands at the small of her back, trying to decide if she wanted to stay standing or park her backside onto one of the chairs. The decision was taken away from her when Dr. Stevens stepped through the door leading back to the exam rooms. She knew where they were because Jamie had been here before when she'd fallen at school and needed a couple of stitches in her arm.

“Good afternoon, ladies. How about we head back to exam room number two, and see what's going on with the little one, shall we?” Beth appreciated it when Dr. Stevens gently took her arm and assisted her through the open doorway. She might have stopped having contraction-type pains, but that didn't mean she felt one hundred percent her normal self. For some reason her back was spasming, the muscles seeming to contract every few minutes. Maybe Tessa was right, she was overdoing things, but she wanted everything perfect for Ms. Patti. And maybe she was a touch OCD about making sure things were done exactly the way she envisioned them.

Climbing up on the table, Beth placed a hand low down against her stomach, smiling when she felt Junior push his tiny

foot against her hand. He sure was active today, and she knew it wouldn't be long before he came out to meet his brand-new family.

“How long have you been having pain, Beth?” Dr. Stevens gently wrapped the blood pressure cuff around her arm and started the portable vital signs machine. She watched the numbers climb as the cuff inflated, squeezing her arm tight. The numbers kept climbing upward, and she started to get a little scared.

“She started having pains, contractions, whatever, about thirty minutes ago, give or take. As soon as I realized, I got her into the car and headed straight here.” Tessa answered Dr. Stevens' question before Beth had a chance.

“Well, not exactly.” Beth shot a guilty look toward her sister. “I had one pain earlier at breakfast time. Didn't think much about it; I thought maybe it was gas. I had another couple earlier at the church while I was decorating, before Tessa came in. Then a few more, closer together. But once we got in the car to come here, they stopped. I haven't had any since.”

Dr. Stevens placed his hand gently on her lower abdomen, then moved it to the right side and then the left. He smiled when Junior gave a hard kick.

“He's pretty active. I noticed when you were standing at the reception desk you had your hands on her back. Has it been bothering you?”

Beth nodded. “The muscles have been spasming for the last couple of hours. Too much bending over decorating

church pews. I'll head home and get the heating pad out, and they'll clear up."

"Beth, I'm going to send the nurse back. Let's get you undressed, so I can take a look at your cervix, make sure everything's how it should be. When's the last time you saw your OB?"

"Two weeks ago. Junior's not due for another three weeks, Doctor."

He smiled what Beth assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile, but inside her emotions were suddenly on a rollercoaster. Worry, anxiety, and a healthy dose of fear all fought for dominance, and she drew in a deep breath, breathing out slowly between her lips, looking for a moment of calm. Everything was alright. Nothing was wrong with her baby. If she kept repeating the mantra in her head, surely it would be true?

Between Tessa and the nurse, they had her changed and lying on the exam table in no time. Tessa held her hand with one of hers, while the other smoothed up and down her forearm in a soothing fashion. She noted Tessa was biting her lower lip, a sure sign she was worried. She'd always done that, even as a little girl.

Dr. Stevens came back into the room, pushing a portable sonogram machine. He quickly plugged it in and moved to stand beside Beth.

"I'd like to take a quick look at the baby, make sure everything's okay. Have you had any more pains?" She shook



her head. “What about your back, are the muscles still giving you a problem or has it eased up?”

Beth had to think about it for a second. “They’re still hurting. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“We’ll see.” He waited while the nurse helped reposition her gown and lowered the sheet covering the lower half of her body, exposing her distended pregnant belly. “I know you’ve probably had a sonogram before, since you know you’re having a boy. Just want to remind you this gel is going to be a little cold.”

She nodded, remembering the previous sonogram. Brody had been there for that one, when they’d found out he was having a son. Dr. Stevens spread the cool gel across her stomach and began moving the wand around. She heard the heartbeat, strong and steady, and fast. So fast. It always surprised her how rapid the baby’s rhythm was, but her OB assured her it was normal. Jamie’s heart rate had always run a little slow, but Junior’s always zoomed along around a hundred and fifty beats per minute.

“Everything looks good, Beth. He’s definitely moving around quite a bit. Guess he’s anxious to come out and join the rest of the family.” Dr. Stevens’ calm voice reassured Beth, especially since he had a good view of the ultrasound.

Beth laughed. “That’s what I keep telling Brody. Junior keeps poking and kicking me, because he can’t wait to come out. I think he’s going to be a soccer player—” Beth broke off as a sharp pain seized her, and she bit back a yell.

“Beth?” Tessa winced as Beth squeezed her hand tight. “Sis, was that a contraction?”

Beth lay back against the pillow and closed her eyes, shutting out the bright overhead light. “Sure felt like one.”

Dr. Stevens nodded. “I thought you might be having labor pains when you mentioned your back hurting. Some women have labor pains that start as pain in their back. You’ve probably been in labor for several hours.”

“What? No. It’s too soon!” Beth felt panic rising with each word. She couldn’t be having the baby now. She wasn’t in a hospital. Brody wasn’t here. Jamie was with a sitter, who’d take care of her?

“Stay calm, Beth. You’ve probably got hours before you deliver. I’m going to check and see how dilated your cervix is, okay? Take a deep breath—good—now another. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Beth lay back against the pillow and closed her eyes, then blinked them open again. Brody. She needed to call Brody.

“I’m on it, Beth.” Tessa let go of her hand and held up her phone. “I’ll let him know to meet us here. Everything’s going to be alright, Sis. Remember, deep breaths. Calm. Go to your happy place.”

“I’ll happy place you, if you don’t—” Breaking off, she groaned through another pain, though this one wasn’t quite as strong as the previous. But all she could think about was it was too soon, the baby still needed to cook for another few weeks. But these pains, they were coming so close together.

“Beth, you are dilated to ten centimeters. I’d say Tessa better get hold of Brody quickly, because you are having this baby today.”

Tessa turned her phone so Beth could see the screen. “Good news. They found Ms. Patti and she’s fine. Well, she’s in the hospital,” she paused, sharing a look with Dr. Stevens, before adding, “they don’t think it’s serious, probably just a bad sprain to her ankle. Rafe and Douglas are on their way to Mercy General now. And Brody didn’t answer his phone, but I’ve got the whole fire department looking for him. I’ll keep trying.”

“Ms. Patti was missing?” Dr. Stevens glanced between Beth and Tessa before shaking his head. “Why do I suddenly feel out of the loop?”

“We didn’t want anybody panicking, she’d only been out of touch for a few hours. I’m pretty sure somebody would have called here though, checking to see if she was hurt.”

He shook his head. “I never got a call.” Standing from the rolling stool, he took his gloves off and turned to the nurse. “Go ahead and get her out of the stirrups, and as comfortable as possible. If her water doesn’t break in the next half hour, we’ll have to do an AROM.”

“A what?” Beth couldn’t quite hide the quiver in her voice.

Dr. Stevens smiled. “Sorry, medical speak. It means an artificial rupture of membranes. Your water hasn’t broken, even though you’re definitely in labor. If it doesn’t break on its own, there’s a procedure we do called an amniotomy. It’s

simple and easy, nothing to worry about. Relax, and we're going to keep an eye on Junior, okay?"

Beth nodded, her hands clutching the sheet covering her stomach. Today was turning out to be nothing like she'd planned. Then again, she mused, when had plans ever amounted to anything when the universe decided to turn everything on its head? You'd think she'd be used to chaos by now. Of course, living with Brody made everything...perfect. He calmed all the turbulence of being nine months pregnant, with a daughter who'd started elementary school and wanted to be part of everything, including all the renovations they were doing to their home. But it was worth any price, because she was happier than she'd ever been in her entire life.

"You're sure Ms. Patti is okay? Did anybody say how she got hurt?"

Tessa shook her head. "All I know is what the text said, that she was at Mercy General Hospital, and they were waiting for tests. I've already sent a text to Rafe, asking him for more info ASAP. Do you think I should call Douglas? Maybe he knows something."

"No, don't bother him. I was already worried when I heard about Ms. Patti being missing, afraid it might affect Douglas' heart. I—we—can wait until Rafe or one of the others fills us in." She sighed. "I just want Brody. I don't want him to miss his son's birth." Beth squeezed her eyes shut as another pain spread across her lower abdomen.

"Lemme go make some more calls. Somebody has to know where he is or how to get hold of him. It's not like

Brody not to answer—” Tessa broke off when her phone rang. She grinned when she read the caller ID and handed the phone to Beth. It was Brody.

“Brody, where are you?”

“Beth? I was calling Tessa back. Her message sounded urgent. Are you okay?”

“Yeah—no—Honey, I’m having the baby.”

“Now? You’re having the baby now? Where are you? Did Tessa take you to the hospital? I can’t believe Junior’s coming. When did you go into labor? Why didn’t you call me? Beth, are we really having the baby today?” Brody’s questions were flying a mile a minute, and Beth clutched the phone in her hand, almost giddy at the happiness in Brody’s voice.

“Slow down, cowboy. Yes, it looks like Junior decided today was the day he wanted to come into the world. I didn’t know I was having labor pains, not until a little while ago. My back was hurting, but I thought it was muscle strain from bending over and tying ribbons on the church pews. We’re at the emergency clinic. Dr. Stevens is taking care of us. Where are you?”

There was a long period of silence on the other end, and Beth wondered if he was going to answer. Finally, he gave a wry chuckle.

“I drove to Austin this morning. The gift we ordered for Momma and Dad came in, and I went to pick it up. Figured I wouldn’t be gone for more than a couple hours and look what happens. Momma goes missing and my wife goes into labor.”

“That’ll teach you not to tell me when you’re going to be gone. You got the message that Ms. Patti is going to be okay, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve been trying to call Rafe, but he’s not answering. All I know is she’s in the hospital and they’re waiting for test results. I swear I’m gonna throttle him when I get hold of him. None of my brothers have been able to reach him, either. I do know Dad’s with him, so I’m assuming they’re on their way to be with Momma.”

“Brody, you said you drove to Austin. Where exactly are you now?” Beth bit her bottom lip as a muscle spasm rocked her back, a soft groan escaping her lips.

“I’m halfway home. My truck kind of...broke down. Dante’s bringing the tow truck to haul it to Frank’s, and he’s supposed to give me a ride back to town.” Guilt colored his words. “I’m going to call my brothers, see if one of them can get here faster and pick me up. Did Dr. Stevens give you any idea when you’ll have the baby, sweetheart? Does he want to send you to the hospital?”

“He didn’t say, he’s keeping an eye on me. He said the baby will probably come today, though. Brody, do the best you can. I want you here. You can’t miss the birth of our son. You can’t!”

Beth handed the phone to Tessa, placing her hand on her belly. A gush of water spread beneath her, beginning to pool on the floor. Guess she didn’t need to worry about them breaking her water, because it just broke.

“Brody, I’m staying with Beth until you get here. She’s having contractions, and her water just broke, so I’d say hurry.” Tessa emphasized the last word before hanging up. Leaning over, she pressed a kiss against Beth’s forehead. “I’m going to get somebody to help clean this up and let Dr. Stevens know your water broke. Be right back.”

Beth nodded and leaned back against the pillows, closing her eyes. Her mother used to say things always happened in threes. So far, there’d only been two today. Maybe they’d get lucky, and they’d miss that particular superstition.

She really hoped so, because she wasn’t sure she could handle any more surprises today.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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**A**FTER GETTING THE text message that Ms. Patti had been located, all the women decided to finish moving everything from Jill's bakery to the church, since it was a good bet Ms. Patti wouldn't be heading there and wouldn't catch on about the party. The plan was to meet Tessa and Beth at the church and make sure the flowers and other decorations were done, and the gift bags were finished.

“Anybody need a ride? I brought the van, so there's plenty of room.” Maggie had shown up about thirty minutes earlier, and Jill thought the other woman looked a bit frazzled. Of course, she'd been dealing with vendors for the past couple of days, and that was enough to send a sane person's blood pressure skyrocketing. Though, come to think of it, Maggie had her hands full dealing with the women coming through the shelter she ran, helping abuse victims get back on their feet and safely away from their abuser. Jill shook her head, wondering how anybody could stay in an abusive relationship, but then again, she didn't have firsthand experience. Her one and only love was Lucas Boudreau, and he was the sweetest, most caring man she'd ever met. It felt like she'd love him her entire life, and being part of the Boudreau circle made her life complete.

“Is there room in the back for the cake? I'd like to get it there...” Jill broke off when she heard her phone's text alert sound, quickly followed by Camilla's phone and Harper's too. “It's Tessa. Oh—oh, Beth's in labor!”



“What?” Maggie snatched the phone right out of Jill’s hand and read the group message. “Girl’s been in labor for several hours and didn’t know it? How do you not know you’re in labor? I mean, we’re talking about pain, right?”

“So I’ve heard. Can’t say I’ve got personal experience.” Harper grinned and turned her phone toward Jill, showing she’d gotten the same message. “She’s at the emergency clinic.”

“Should we go there? Let me call Tessa, see if they’re sending her to the hospital.” Jill’s hand shook as she dialed, waiting for Tessa to pick up. It was exciting, knowing Beth and Brody’s son would arrive soon. Of course, it kind of threw a wrench in their plans for tomorrow, especially if Ms. Patti ended up being admitted to the hospital. Not that the celebration couldn’t be postponed, but she couldn’t help worrying about both women, both of whom were part of the reason there was even a celebration to begin with.

“Jill!” Tessa’s raised voice told Jill more than words could how excited Tessa was Beth was in labor. “We’re at the clinic. Beth’s in labor, really in labor this time and not Braxton-Hicks, and Brody’s not here!”

“What? Why isn’t he with Beth?”

“Apparently he drove to Austin to pick up something, and his truck broke down on the way back. I swear, his timing could have been a little better, but Dante’s on the way to meet him with the tow truck.”

Knowing her brother, she’d bet Dante would drive like the Caped Crusader leaving the bat cave to get to Brody. Dante

and Brody were good friends, and he knew how much Brody needed to be by Beth's side when his son came into the world.

“What can we do? Maggie, Camilla, Harper, and I were loading stuff to take over to the church when we got the message about Ms. Patti, and then your group text about Beth.”

She heard Tessa sigh, and then silence then a fumbling sound. “Jill, I want you and the others to do exactly what we planned. Get the stuff over to the church. Make sure everything that can be put into the freezers and refrigerators gets in them. All the flowers are already set up in the front of the church, and there are three more pews that need decorating, if one of y'all can take care of that.”

Jill chuckled softly because that hadn't been Tessa barking out orders, it had been Beth. Trust the little general to want to keep things moving on her timetable, even while suffering labor pains. It looked doubtful they'd be having a party tomorrow, not with two of the main participants laid up in the hospital, but if Beth wanted them to pretend everything was normal, who was she to rock the boat?

“Beth, don't worry about a thing. All you need to concentrate on is having a healthy baby. Us gals will make sure the pews are decorated, the food is secured and put away, just like you assigned. I'll make sure the hairdresser and the makeup person are put on hold for tomorrow as well, at least until we know more about what's happening.”

“Thanks, Jill. I swear—” Beth's voice abruptly cut off, and a long loud groan came through loud and clear over the line,

followed by panting breaths. Jill looked at Camilla and Harper, whose twin expressions were intense, following along with every word.

“Gotta go,” Tessa sounded frantic. “Doctor just walked in and needs to check on Beth.”

The distinctive sound of the call disconnecting echoed through the speaker. “Well, we have our marching orders, ladies.” She flung her arm dramatically toward the road. “To the church!”

Harper and Camilla chuckled as they climbed into Maggie’s van. “Are we going to the clinic after we finish up at the church?”

Maggie nodded, starting the car. “Try and stop us.”



“YOU HEARD THE doctor. There’s nothing broken, it’s simply strained ligaments. They aren’t even going to admit me.” Folding her arms across her chest, Ms. Patti stared at the three men standing at the foot of her hospital bed. Each one of them wore identical expressions, mulish and stubborn. And worried. While she appreciated their concern, she wasn’t about to get stuck in a hospital bed for a sprained ankle. The doctor said the blackout spell was probably dehydration, and they’d pumped an IV into her arm while they’d been waiting for the radiology results. All-in-all she felt fine, and more than ready to head home. Yet her overly concerned husband, son, and hopefully soon-to-be-client and new neighbor acted like she was a recalcitrant five-year-old pouting for her missing stuffed bunny.

“Love, I think it would be a good idea to stay one night. I know the doctor said it was your choice, but—”

“Douglas, you do remember what tomorrow is, don’t you?” She injected a modicum of sweetness into her words and watched a wave of guilt wash over his face. More surprising was the look of what-the-heck that crossed Rafe’s face. Something was up with her son. If she was at the top of her game, she’d figure it out, but right now she needed to focus on getting back to her own home, her own bed. Plus, she needed to call Jill or Tessa and make sure everything was on track for Beth’s surprise baby shower.

“Momma, I don’t know—” Before he could finish his sentence, Rafe’s phone sounded a text alert, and he pulled it free of his pocket. His eyes widened at what was written there.

“Rafe, what’s wrong?” Douglas’ deep voice asked the question before she could.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Rafe grinned. “Beth’s having the baby. Apparently she’s been in labor for a while and didn’t realize it.”

Throwing back the blanket covering her legs, she struggled to sit upright. “Decision made. There’s no way you’re making me stay in the hospital when my daughter-in-law is having my grandson. Douglas, get my clothes out of the closet. Rafe, go tell the doctor to get the discharge papers ready.” She looked at Stan, noted him shifting from one foot to the other. “And you’re coming with us.”

His surprised gaze met hers. “Ma’am, this is a family affair. I’m just going to head home, and...” He trailed off

when Ms. Patti slammed both fists on her hips. Catching sight of Rafe standing behind her, rapidly shaking his head and waving his hands, mouthing the words, “Don’t argue with her, man,” Stan shrugged. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good boy.” Taking the clothes from her husband, she hobbled into the bathroom, knowing the men would wait for her to get dressed. While she didn’t want to put the soiled clothing back on, there wasn’t time to drop by the house and change, and she wasn’t about to head back to Shiloh Springs in a cotton hospital gown. A jubilant feeling of excitement coursed through her. She was going to be a grandmother again. She adored her granddaughter Jamie, Beth’s daughter from her first marriage, and her grandson, Daniel, but this was going to be special, because she’d get to be there when this baby was born. See him take his first breath. Hear his first cry. Well, she would if they got there on time. Standing on her left foot, and keeping her weight off the bandaged right ankle, she quickly tossed on her clothes, leaving the hospital gown neatly folded on the edge of the sink. She rolled her eyes at the state of her hair, the normally fluffy and sprayed bouffant flatter than the proverbial pancake, but there wasn’t time to worry about it now. Right now, they needed to get to Beth.

She limped back into the hospital room. “Rafe, what hospital is Beth in? We need to get there right away.”

“Momma, she’s not in a hospital. She’s at the emergency clinic in Shiloh Springs. Doctor Stevens is taking care of her.”

“Why isn’t she in the hospital, surrounded by her obstetrician, nurses, and all her family?” *Not to mention*

*having an epidural available if she wants one?*

“Momma, I’m simply going by what Tessa texted me. She said Beth was in labor. She’d apparently been in labor for several hours. Said she thought it was back pain. Beth thought it was from bending over...um...doing something she shouldn’t have been doing. When the pain got worse, Tessa rushed her to the clinic. Doctor Stevens checked her with the fetal monitor and said she was in labor. Oh, and Brody’s not there either.”

Those words hit her like a slap in the face. There was no way Brody wouldn’t be at Beth’s side when she was having the baby. Not unless something was wrong. Anxiety pooled in the pit of her stomach, and she held out her hand.

“Give me your phone.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Quickly dialing Tessa’s number, the phone rang and rang until finally an out of breath Tessa answered.

“Rafe, honey, I said I’d call you when I have any news. How’s Ms. Patti?”

“I’m fine,” she replied. “What I want to know is where Brody is, and why he isn’t at Beth’s bedside?”

“Ms. Patti! I’m so glad you’re okay. You had us all so worried. Why didn’t you call if you were in trouble? One of us could have come and—”

“Thank you, dear. Now, please answer my question. Where is my son?”

“Brody drove to Austin on some fool’s errand, and on his way back his truck broke down. Dante’s on his way with the tow truck to pick it up. Chance decided to head that way too, to pick up Brody and rush him back here as fast as he can.”

She let out the breath that had been caught in her chest at the thought of something bad happening to her son. Now at least she could relax for a minute before they hit the road back to Shiloh Springs. The only hold up was the doctor coming back with the discharge papers, or the nurse, or somebody, anybody, but they’d better hurry or she was fixing to walk out without approval. There was no way she was going to miss this big event. It wasn’t every day a woman became a grandmother.

“Good. Now tell me how Beth is doing? Are they moving her to the hospital?”

“We’re not sure yet. The contractions have slowed, which is good, but they haven’t stopped, so Doctor Stevens thinks we have some time. He’s got a call in to Beth’s obstetrician, and she’s on her way. But she’s also dilated to ten centimeters, which means the baby might come at any time.”

“Tell Beth we love her and we’re on our way. If anything changes or if she has the baby before we get there, please call us. Tessa, I’m glad you’re there for your sister.”

“No place else I’d rather be, Ms. Patti. Love you.”

Ms. Patti drew in a deep breath at Tessa’s declaration. It never got old, hearing the women she’d come to think of as daughters express their feelings.

“Love you, too, Tessa. See you soon.”

Handing the phone back to Rafe, she turned to face her husband. “Get me out of here, honey.”

Without a word, Douglas swept her up in his muscular arms and headed for the door, Rafe and Stan quickly following. Even after all these years, Douglas Boudreau remained her knight in shining armor, slaying her dragons, and hopefully in this instance, getting her to the birth on time.

She leaned her head against his chest and whispered, “I love you.”

His expression tender, he smiled and whispered, “I love you too.”



## CHAPTER NINE

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**R**AFE WAS PRETTY sure he was breaking all kinds of speed records heading back toward Shiloh Springs, and if he wasn't the sheriff, he was sure he'd be pulled over. Luckily, he was in his cruiser, so he radioed ahead and let dispatch know he'd be running with lights and sirens. Of course, once he told Sally Anne why, he knew word would spread across Shiloh Springs like wildfire, because if you wanted people to find something out, all you had to do was tell Sally Anne. Not that she was a huge gossip or anything. She was just an overly friendly lady who didn't mind sharing news if she had some. And Beth being in labor would be considered big news.

“Any word from Tessa?”

“Nothing since the last time you asked, Momma. I've got the phone right here,” he pointed to a cell phone holder on his dash, “so I won't miss any calls or texts.”

He glanced over at the stranger seated in the passenger seat of the cruiser. Stan Ferguson ended up coming with them, at his mother's insistence. He might be wrong, but he had the feeling his mother wasn't about to let Stan walk away without showing her appreciation. It would simply have to wait until after the baby was born. Rafe was glad the man had stuck around, because he wanted to get the full story from him of how he'd managed to find his mother when nobody else could.

“Ferguson, my Patti tells me you're William and Beverly's son. How's your dad doing?”

Stan swiveled in his seat, as far as the seatbelt allowed. “I talked to my mom this morning. She said he’s doing a little better. They’re waiting for the doctor to come and see him today, and a couple more tests, to determine if he’s going to need surgery or whether they’ll send him to a cardiac rehab place.”

“You let your mother know if she needs anything, we’re here for them. And for you too. I know it’s rough dealing with something like this.” Ms. Patti leaned her head against Douglas’ shoulder. “We just went through something similar with my husband and his heart. Scared a good ten years off my life, the not knowing, the waiting to find out, for decisions to be made.”

“I’m glad I could come and help them out. A couple of years ago that wouldn’t have been the case. I was in a...bad place in my life.”

Douglas nodded at Stan’s words. “We’ve all been there at one point or another. That’s why God gives us second chances.”

“Third and fourth chances sometimes. But I eventually got my head on straight, cleaned up my act, and asked my folks for forgiveness. We’re slowly rebuilding our relationship, one step at a time. It’s mostly been long distance, but when Dad went into the hospital, my mom needed me here.”

Rafe had been quietly listening to the conversation, getting a feel for Stan Ferguson. His gut told him Stan was an upright guy, but these were his parents the man was ingratiating himself with. He’d be running a background check on the guy,

just to play it safe. More than one con artist had made his way through Shiloh Springs, and doing his due diligence helped protect its citizens. He would do no less for his own parents.

The phone rang once, and he swiped to answer, putting it on speak.

“Hey, babe. How’s Beth?”

“We’re still in a holding pattern. Her labor pains have moved farther apart, so Doctor Stevens isn’t sure exactly how long it’ll be. When she had Jamie, she wasn’t in a long, protracted labor. I thought second babies were supposed to come faster. Oh, and Brody got here a few minutes ago.”

Rafe heard his mother’s sigh. Well, at least that was one worry out of the way.

“Good. Is he a nervous wreck?”

Tessa chuckled. “Nah. He’s being all stoic and patient. Probably all his EMT training. Of course, he’ll probably be the type to pass out as soon as the baby starts coming.”

“My son will not pass out.” Douglas huffed out a laugh. “He’ll probably tell Doctor Stevens to get out of the way and let him deliver the baby himself.”

“You know him so well, Douglas. Doctor Stevens already told him if he keeps telling him what to do, he’s going to make him leave the room.”

Rafe laughed aloud because he could picture Brody doing exactly that. Glancing down, he saw that he was doing close to ninety miles an hour and eased back on the accelerator. They’d be getting close to town soon, and he wanted to get everybody

there in one piece. A tingle of excitement raced through him at the thought of another little Boudreau joining their clan. Brody's excitement at becoming a father had become infectious, and he and Tessa had started several discussions about starting a family. Though they were newly married, neither of them wanted to wait long before trying to have kids. He wanted at least three. Tessa said she wanted as many as they could fill the house with, maybe have both biological as well as foster kids.

He could get behind that plan.

"Tell them both we'll be there soon. Has everybody else shown up?"

"Pretty much," Tessa stopped talking for a second. "Gotta go, Beth's labor pains are getting closer together. Get her as quick as you can, Rafe. You don't want to miss your nephew's birth, do you?"

"We're on the way. Tell Beth she's gotta wait until Momma and Dad get there."

"I'll tell her. Just hurry."



BETH LOOKED DOWN at the tiny bundle lying on her chest, blond hair escaping from the cap on his head, and he yawned, his cupid's bow mouth opening wide, like a little bird. She'd already counted all his fingers and toes, making sure he had a matching set of ten each. Brody couldn't seem to stop smiling and touching his son.

"He's perfect, honey. I can't believe he's really here."

“Patrick Elijah Boudreau. You’re still okay with the name, right?” They’d spend days and days trying to find the perfect name, and finally decided to name the baby after Ms. Patti’s brother and Beth’s father.

“I love his name. Just like I love him. You know he’s going to be spoiled rotten, with all these aunts and uncles around.”

“Speaking of which, I think we’d better let your momma and dad in first, before the rest of the hoard descends. Oh, and Nica brought Jamie with her. They can come in after your folks.”

Brody leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I love you. I know things have been crazy lately, with planning the wedding, the reception, and the baby. I couldn’t be prouder of you than I am. You are amazing.”

“I love you too.”

Brody opened the door to the exam room and stepped out to get his parents. Beth leaned against the pillow, still kind of shocked that she’d had the baby in the emergency clinic and not in a hospital. Of course, the hospital would have been her second choice anyway. She’d planned to have her baby at home, unless there were complications. Everything had been planned, right down to her obstetrician coming to the house when it was time. Guess Patrick Elijah had a different timetable than hers.

“Beth, honey, are you doing okay?” Ms. Patti limped into the room and leaned over, glancing down at the baby. Douglas pulled the chair closer to the edge of the bed, and eased Ms. Patti down onto it.

“I should be asking you that. What happened?”

“Piffle. I sprained my ankle, that’s all.”

Douglas cleared his throat and stared at his wife, who sighed. “Fine. I went to look at a house, a new client. I climbed into this big outdoor shed and managed to slip and fall...” She glared at her husband, who had started chuckling, and Ms. Patti punched his arm. “It’s not that funny.”

“Depends on who’s telling the story.” Douglas’ deep voice was filled with humor, and she wondered at the good-natured ribbing.

Ms. Patti rolled her eyes. “I did something stupid, which caused me to fall. Twisted my ankle. I tried to get to my purse and phone which I’d put on the floor, but when the plywood underneath me shifted, I ended up on one side of the shed and they were on the other, out of reach. Fortunately, a neighbor came and found me before the rattlesnake under the shed crawled up to find out what was causing all the noise.”

“Rattlesnake? You didn’t mention any snake.” All humor fled from Douglas as he stared at his wife.

“Oops, I forgot that part. Anyway, Stan took me to the hospital, got my ankle wrapped, and if I stay off it a couple of days, it’ll be fine. I’m more interested in this new little one. Give me all the details.”

Beth smiled and cuddled the baby closer. “Douglas, Ms. Patti, meet Patrick Elijah Boudreau. Eight pounds, two ounces, twenty-one inches long.” Looking at her mother-in-law, she asked, “Would you like to hold your grandson?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Easing her hands under the baby’s head and back, she handed the baby to Ms. Patti. Watched the expression of love fill her gaze as tears ran down her cheeks.

“I was so afraid I’d miss his birth. When Rafe told us you were in labor, and I was in another county and couldn’t get here, I thought I wouldn’t make it back in time.” Reaching out, she grabbed onto Douglas’ hand. “Thank you, Beth. Thank you for loving our son. Thank you for giving us a beautiful grandson.”

“No, Ms. Patti, I should be the one thanking you. You brought me into your home, accepted me and my daughter as part of your family. But most importantly, you gave me Brody. I love you and Douglas and can’t imagine my life without you being a part of it. I’m so glad to belong to the Boudreaus. I feel like I’m finally home.”

“You are home, Beth. You and Tessa and all the others, the Boudreau clan is growing, and I couldn’t be happier. We are truly blessed.”

Patrick let out a wail, and Ms. Patti gave a watery chuckle. “He wants to meet the rest of his family. Guess we should let them all meet the newest Boudreau.”

## CHAPTER TEN

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CANDELABRAS WITH TALL white pillar candles bathed the front of the church with a golden glow. Huge arrangements of flowers stood on either side of the front steps that led to the church's pulpit, and the center row of pews were beribboned with gold and silver-toned bows and petals. There was a quiet solemnity throughout the church, and the building was filled to near capacity.

Douglas couldn't believe his family managed to pull off an event this big without Ms. Patti suspecting anything. A tiny smile curved his lips. He hadn't admitted anything to his kids, but he'd know almost immediately what they were doing. He also knew his beautiful bride deserved every moment of happiness this ceremony, this vow renewal, would mean. He rubbed a hand over his chest, barely able to contain all the love he felt for the men and women he called family. Never in a million years could he imagine his life without a single one of them. When he'd sat beside a terrified and insecure Rafe's bedside all those years ago and told his wife he was bringing the boy home, little had he realized how blessed his life would become. How filled with the kind of love you usually only get once in a lifetime. Yet he'd been blessed with eleven strong, caring, and wonderful boys who'd grown into fine men. Men he was proud of, and humbled that he was part of helping mold them into gentlemen who not only knew right from wrong but upheld and defended those not as fortunate. Eleven men and one feisty daughter who'd stolen into his life and his heart, and he couldn't imagine a single day without them in it.



Of course, there were really more if you counted their “Lost Boys,” which he did. They might not carry the Boudreau name, but they were still part of this family.

“You okay, Dad?” Dane leaned around Chance, who stood next to him, a look of concern on his face. All his sons were lined up beside him at the front of the church, each resplendent in tuxedos. While Douglas would’ve been happy with simple shirts and jeans, his sons insisted they do this wedding up right. He’d complied, because after all, his beautiful wife deserved the best.

“I’m fine, son. Can’t believe y’all pulled a fast one on me and your momma. It’s all too much.”

“It’s past time you and Momma got something special. There’s nobody who deserves it more. I don’t even want to think about what our lives would have been like without you both. I know none of us would have turned out the way we did without you, and the example you’ve shown us, teaching us how be good men and good fathers.”

Douglas closed his eyes, fighting back the tears his son’s words brought. He felt blessed to call each one of them son, and was so proud of the men they’d become, and the women they’d chosen to spend the rest of their lives with. Of course, Nica was the daughter of his heart, and would always hold a special place, but just because she was biologically his didn’t diminish the ties he felt to the rest of his children.

The low murmur of voices from the crowd was like white noise in the background, as Douglas pulled up the memory of the first time he’d married the love of his life. He’d know the

minute he'd seen Patricia Mackenzie that somehow he'd find a way to marry her. The feelings he'd had for Elizabeth, the woman he'd thought he loved and lost to his brother, fell away into simple affection when compared to how he felt about his "Miss Patti." Her sweet Southern charm overlay the backbone of steel she possessed, and he knew she'd be the perfect wife. The one woman in all the world he wanted to spend every moment of every day with. Those feelings hadn't changed, even after thirty wonderful years.

Glancing down at the front row pew, his brother Gator and his family filled the pew. Ranger, Etienne, Jean-Luc, and Sebastian were all there with their wives. Gabi and her husband, Dylan, were there too, along with their newborn daughter, who was cradled snugly against Gabi's chest. His other brother, Hank, sat directly behind them. The whole family was here, had traveled from their homes to attend this joyous occasion, and it meant everything to him. He only hoped they knew how much.

He shifted from foot to foot, ready to get the show on the road, but he didn't want to rush things. This day, this moment, it was something his beloved Patricia deserved, and he wanted her to savor every moment, to bask in the adoration of her children, her neighbors and her friends and know that she was loved.

But he couldn't keep his eyes from the double doors at the back of the church, his heart beating faster and faster at the thought of her stepping through them and repeating the vows they'd taken thirty years prior. He'd meant every word of them then, and he'd mean every word of them now. It was almost

like a new beginning, the second half of their journey. One he couldn't wait to take with the woman he called his everything.



MS. PATTI SMOOTHED her hands against the dress again, and felt the silken fabric rub against her. Thankfully, the women hadn't picked out a frou-frou dress for her wedding. This was more like an evening gown, but it suited her far better than a lacy white concoction. That might have worked when she'd been a young bride just starting out, but now she was an experienced woman. One with a family full of children who'd gone out of their way to surprise her and Douglas with a ceremony that would see them repeat their wedding vows before their family and friends.

Her family had gone all out, making sure everything was perfect. Flowers filled the front of the family church, the scents lending a quiet elegance to the upcoming proceedings. The entire church was decorated from top to bottom, with gold and silver highlights on every pew and candelabra. She'd gotten a sneak peek at the sanctuary when she'd arrived at the church to get ready a few hours ago.

Not only had the women picked out her dress, but they'd managed to somehow find and decorate a cane she could use to walk down the aisle because of her strained ankle. As far as she could tell, her daughters-in-law and soon-to-be daughters-in-law had thought of just about everything.

Tears prickled at the back of her lids, ones she didn't dare shed, because the makeup artist they'd hired and who'd driven in all the way from Austin had warned her not to ruin her

makeup. She had to admit the woman was a genius with her craft, because Ms. Patti would swear she looked ten years younger.

Her hair had been upswept in a style she hadn't worn in probably close to thirty years. It reminded her of how she'd worn it at her first wedding to Douglas. It had been longer then. Heat rushed into her cheeks as she remembered him taking the pins out and it flowing down around her shoulders on their wedding night. They'd had so little time together before he'd had to head back to Germany, but the few short days together had been beautiful. This whole vow renewal ceremony brought back hauntingly familiar memories, and she vowed to make brand new ones today.

Standing, she walked over to the full-length mirror set up in the room off the foyer that had been confiscated to use as a dressing area for the bridal party. The sleeveless gold dress hugged her curves in all the right places and fell to the top of her toes. Her mouth scrunched up at the sight of the sock on her right foot instead of a fancy shoe to match the dress. Oh, well, she had them in a box and she'd wear them one day, just not today.

"Ms. Patti, you look beautiful." Maggie stood behind her and gently ran a hand over her shoulder. "I knew this color would be splendid with your coloring. Douglas isn't going to be able to keep his eyes off you."

"Thank you, sweetie. I can't believe you all managed to plan an entire wedding event and tried to pass it off as Beth's baby shower. Which we'll have to really do, by the way. Just

because the baby came a few weeks early doesn't mean we can't celebrate."

"Patrick Elijah Boudreau decided it was time to make his grand entrance." Tessa grinned and pulled her hand from behind her back, holding a single white rose and a sprig of baby's breath. "For your hair." She gestured toward Ms. Patti's head. "May I?"

Emotion choked her, and she nodded, leaning slightly against Harper, who led her to a chair. Tessa placed the flower behind her right ear, and held up a mirror, letting her see how perfect the flowers set off the upswept hairstyle.

"I peeked in the sanctuary and the guys are all standing up front in their tuxes." Camilla closed the door softly behind her. "It's definitely a sight I never expected to see. Heath dressed in a formal black tuxedo? My muscle-bound, leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding honey in pretty much anything but jeans and a T-shirt? It makes my heart go pitter-patter." She chuckled. "The rest of those Boudreau boys don't look half bad either, I gotta say."

Glancing around the room, Ms. Patti watched each of the women who'd become part of her family. Part of her life. Part of the joy that filled her each day and she thanked God they'd become her daughters. She couldn't have picked anyone better for each of her sons.

Her lone regret today was that Beth couldn't be here. The women had told her earlier that morning the entire purpose of the party had been Beth's idea from the start, and she'd worked harder than anyone to make sure everything was

perfect. She'd even been putting flowers on the church pews when she'd been in labor. Giving birth to Patrick had been a miracle, and something Ms. Patti would never regret, not for an instant, but she wished Beth was here, by her side, so she could hug her and tell her how touched and honored she was to have her for a daughter.

“I love you. All of you. I probably don't say it enough, but you have brought light and joy into my life, into the lives of my sons. I realize I can get all up in your business sometimes, thinking my way is always the right way, but you've all proven time and again you fit perfectly into the Boudreau clan, and I couldn't be happier to have you here.”

“Oh, darn it, now you've done it. You made me cry.” Tina grabbed the box of tissue and pulled a couple free before passing the box on to the next woman.

“It wasn't easy pulling the wool over your eyes, Ms. Patti. We were afraid somebody in town was going to spill the beans and tell you what we were planning.”

She shook her head. “Nobody told me anything, I swear.”

*Nobody had to tell me anything. While I love you gals to pieces, you're not exactly cut out for the sleuthing lifestyle. I figured out what y'all were doing right from the start, but you were having so much fun trying to fool Douglas and me, I couldn't take that away from you. And look at what you've accomplished. This will be the perfect wedding.*

A quiet knock sounded on the door, and Harper opened it a crack, before turning to face the room, a huge smile on her face.

“Look who decided to show up.” Pulling the door open, Ms. Patti gasped as she spotted Beth standing in the doorway, holding the baby in her arms.

“Beth!”

“You didn’t think I was about to miss the big day, did you?” Walking over to Ms. Patti, she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her cheek. “I had to blackmail Doctor Stevens with the promise of a whole tray of Jill’s black-and-white brownies in order to let me come, but it’ll totally be worth it.” She cast a sheepish smile toward Jill. “Um, I guess I’m going to need some brownies.”

“I’ve got you covered, girlfriend. We’re all glad you’re here, too.”

Tessa pulled another chair from against the wall, and helped Beth sit beside Ms. Patti, before reaching for little Patrick. All the ladies crowded around, touching the little fingers peeking out from the blanket, or brushing their hand against his baby-soft cheek. Light blond hair covered his head, and he gave a big yawn, never waking from his peaceful slumber to notice the passel of women surrounding him.

Another knock on the door, this one a sharp staccato rap, signified it was time to start the ceremony. Nica walked over and gently lifted Patrick from Tessa’s arms, cradling him against her chest.

“I’m going to take care of this precious bundle, Momma.” She brushed a soft kiss against his head. “I’ll be watching every second. You and Dad, you deserve all the happiness in

the world. You've always made me feel loved and special and it's about time we do the same for you."

"But, Nica, you're supposed to be part of the entourage, and walk down the aisle too. You're as much a part of everything as we all are." Tessa looked between Nica and her mother, noting the almost silent communication between them, and threw her hands up and stepped back.

"That's right, Tessa, we all have our part. I've had Momma from the moment I came into this world, and I'll always have her. Right now, my place is here, with the newest Boudreau."

Serena approached Ms. Patti, the wedding bouquet in her hands. Ms. Patti's breath caught in her throat at the sight, the gorgeous flowers arranged in a simple yet elegant spray she'd hold in front of her as she walked down the aisle. It was small enough that she'd be able to hold it with one hand and maneuver her cane with the other.

"Are you ready, Ms. Patti?" Renee asked softly, looking lovely in her pale green dress.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm ready."

"Okay, then, ladies, you know what to do. Let's line up in the order we practiced."

Tessa lined up first, followed by Serena, then Beth, Maggie, Jill, Camilla, Renee, Tina, Destiny, Ruby, and finally Lauren, all with matching flowers in their hands, smaller versions of her own bridal bouquet.

The double doors to the sanctuary opened, and the music began, each one walking down the center aisle toward the



front, where her sons stood straight and proud beside their father. Douglas. The man she'd loved for what seemed like her whole life. From the moment she'd locked eyes with him in New Orleans, nobody else existed for her. Now he stood at the front of their family church, waiting for her. To affirm and swear that he loved her, would love her until the end of time. Darn her sprained ankle. She wanted to sprint down to the front and throw herself into his arms. Yet at the same time, she wanted to savor every second of the pomp and ceremony that their children had made possible. Her heart felt like it would explode in her chest from happiness.

Now it was her turn. The music changed to the Wedding March by Mendelssohn and everyone inside the church stood and turned around to watch her. Taking a deep breath, she jolted when a masculine arm curved around hers.

“I hope you don't mind, Ms. Patti, if I walk you down the aisle?”

Nick. He'd come all the way from Australia, and he was here. She could only nod and clutch the flowers tighter in her left hand, as they started toward the front. Having Nick here, one of her beloved “Lost Boys” made this day even more special.

Her eyes to the front, she carefully measured each step, holding onto Nick, knowing he wouldn't let her fall. They'd only made it about a third of the way down the aisle when he stopped, leaned down to kiss her cheek, and stepped back. Within seconds, another arm was linked through hers, and her eyes welled with tears as Brian smiled at her.

“You didn’t think I’d miss today, did you, Ms. Patti?”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered, and they started walking again as the music swelled. Her eyes met Douglas’ and she noted they were damp with tears.

Again, they’d only made it about a third of the way toward the front of the church when Brian stopped, and eased his arm from hers, and another masculine arm entwined with hers.

Gage. Tall, dressed in a suit and tie, his dark hair gleamed under the lights, and his tender smile made her realize her wedding day was complete. Everyone who mattered, those who played a part in her life, all stood in this church at this moment, and suddenly the ceremony didn’t matter. The flowers, the cake, the champagne—none of it mattered—because she had everything she needed right in front of her.

Within a few steps, they were at the front of the church. As she turned to face Douglas, she noticed Nick and Brian bringing a decorated bench and placing it at the front, right where she and Douglas would stand. Instead, her thoughtful family had known standing through the ceremony would be hard, and they’d come up with an ingenious solution—where both she and Douglas could sit side-by-side to recite their VOWS.

“Dearly Beloved,” began Pastor Bob.

Douglas leaned close and whispered in her ear, “You are my dearly beloved. I have loved you forever, and will love you throughout eternity, my sweet Miss Patti.”

“I love you to eternity and beyond. You have always held my heart and kept it safe. From the moment we met, I’ve been yours, and there is no power on this earth that can keep us apart, my love.”

The sound of Pastor Bob clearing his throat had the rest of the people in the sanctuary laughing.

“Mind if I finish my part now?”

“Go right ahead, Pastor. We’ve already done ours. You might as well get to the part where I kiss the bride, because I’m about to.”

Pastor Bob chuckled. “I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Boudreau. Douglas, you may now kiss your bride.”

Douglas wrapped his arms around her and kissed her with a passion and intensity that she matched, pouring every ounce of love she felt into it.

A rousing cheer rose through the church, as Douglas stood and swept Ms. Patti into his arms and carried her down the aisle like a new husband carrying his bride across the threshold, and straight to the double doors, stopping only to kiss her again. Their first thirty years together had been filled with love, laughter, and passion, and it looked like they had another thirty years to keep sharing their joy.

And she couldn’t wait to get started.

**Thank you for reading Ms. Patti, Book #14 in the Texas Boudreau Brotherhood series. I hope you enjoyed reading this story about Ms. Patti and learning a little more about the wonderful Boudreau family and the love they share that's bigger than the state of Texas. Next up is Nick, and he has a big secret he's bringing with him to Shiloh Springs, along with a ton of danger that follows him to our favorite small town. Want to find out more about *Nick and the thrill ride he's about to plunge headfirst into*? Keep reading for an excerpt from *Nick (Texas Boudreau Brotherhood Book #15)*.**



Nick (Texas Boudreau Brotherhood Book #15) by Kathy Ivan

**T**HE WAITING ROOM outside of the OR was packed with wall-to-wall Boudreaus. The emergency clinic in Shiloh Springs had managed to stabilize Antonio but didn't have the equipment or staff available to treat his critical condition and he was medevacked to the trauma center in Austin. Douglas had traveled in the helicopter with Antonio, and the rest of the family had broken land-speed records getting to Dell Seton Hospital, where they awaited word on Antonio's condition.

Nick sat alone against the far wall, head hung low. He knew he shouldn't have come back to Shiloh Springs again. Yeah, he'd been here recently, but that had been job related, in an effort to bring down a human trafficking monster named Winston Brashear. He honestly hadn't expected any of the Boudreaus to recognize him. Not after so many years of not seeing them. But he hadn't counted on Ms. Patti and the love

she felt for every boy who had ever stayed at the Boudreau ranch.

She'd recognized him immediately, even though he didn't look or talk the way he had when he'd been a snot-nosed brat with a chip on his shoulder and a screw you attitude toward the world. Didn't matter that he'd dyed his hair, had a dark tan and wore colored contacts and had grown over a foot taller. That amazing, loving, giving woman had met his gaze across the crowded diner and immediately knew him.

And how amazing was that?

When he showed up at the Big House earlier today, he'd debated whether to go inside and reconnect with the family who'd meant everything to him, or to simply turn around and disappear again. With his past, no matter how much good he did, how many people he helped, he never felt clean. No, he'd been immersed in the ugliness for too long, and he didn't want to bring that anywhere close to Douglas and Ms. Patti or the rest of their family. Better for him to quietly disappear again with nobody the wiser.

Only Antonio had come outside before Nick could make a clean getaway and convinced him to come inside. He couldn't help remembering what happened.

He uncurled his fingers from the steering wheel, admitting he was stalling. He hadn't seen her since that day in Rafe's office, when she'd recognized him. That fact alone still floored him. Nobody had ever recognized and connected Nick Vincent with Assad, hired killer working for one of the biggest facilitators of human trafficking.

Yet she hadn't hesitated. Even with the black hair and contact lens, and the passage of more than fifteen years, she'd known him. She'd lovingly told him she recognized him with her heart. And to learn she and Douglas had looked for him after he'd been removed from their home? Unbelievable.

He'd given his word he'd return back to Shiloh Springs when he'd been called by his boss. They had needed to finish the job they'd started, which was to put away the monster preying on young girls and boys and selling them to the highest bidder. Those who didn't sell, well he didn't like thinking about the tens of thousands that had disappeared without a trace. He knew what that felt like on a very personal level—he'd been one of those who'd fallen between the cracks—until Grant Calvin rescued him and put him on the road to redemption.

He nearly jumped at the hard rap on the driver's side window. "You gonna sit out here all day or come in and join the party?"

Party? Nope, he wasn't ready for a Boudreau family celebration. He'd only planned to see Ms. Patti one final time, get the chance to speak with Douglas, and then hightail it out of Shiloh Springs before it managed to draw him back in with its charm and down-home goodness. Somehow, he doubted Antonio would let him start the car and leave without anybody the wiser.

Climbing from the rental, he stood to his full height and looked around, taking in the expanse of green lawn surrounding the front of the house. The two story home with

its dark green shutters and white columns looked the same, though it had the appearance of being freshly painted. Large live oak trees flanked it on both sides, providing not only shade on hot days, he remembered, but it gave the place a stately Southern charm.

“I did not realize you were celebrating. I don’t wish to intrude. I will come back another time to see Ms. Patti and Douglas.”

Antonio made a scoffing sound. “Seriously, you think I’m going back in there and tell Momma and Dad I let you leave without coming inside? Nuh-uh, not happening. Besides, in a roundabout way you’re part of this celebration. You probably heard Joshua and Lauren get to keep Daniel. He is officially their son.”

Nick smiled. “I heard. Don’t have any details; just they had legally adopted the boy. After what Brashear put them through, I’m glad they are finding happiness.”

“Yep, they are so sickly sweet together, it’s enough to make your teeth rot. Good thing they’re getting hitched soon, so they can move out and get their own place. I swear between Jamie, Daniel, and with Brody and Beth’s newest little one due any day, it’s getting as crowded as the Houston Rodeo around here.”

Standing with Antonio, Nick felt overwhelmed by nostalgia for the short time he’d spent here on the Boudreau ranch. Though he hadn’t been here long, he remembered every second of it. Even the stuff he didn’t like invaded his thoughts. Like chores. And being the smallest kid—though that didn’t

apply anymore. He'd had a major growth spurt in his teens and shot up to over six feet tall. The Boudreau ranch had become ingrained in his memories as the epitome of home. It was the place he clung to when his world turned into a cesspool of despair, and he thought he couldn't live another minute. He'd remember the love of Ms. Patti, the way she'd pull him close, ruffle his hair, and tell him how much she loved him. Which seemed impossible because he knew he'd been an unlovable child. He'd remember Douglas taking him out to the barn and showing him how to work with leather, repair bridles, or brush the horses. Douglas hadn't been one to show his emotions, didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, but every night he'd hug Nick and tell him he was glad he was part of their family.

“Listen, man, I can't do this. I thought I could simply drop in, visit for a few minutes, say hello to you guys, and take off, putting Shiloh Springs and the Big House in my rearview. Except I know if I walk through those doors, everything's gonna change. And I'm not ready to have my life turn upside down. Give the family my apologies. Tell them I got called away.”

Antonio shook his head. “You're making a big mistake. Momma has talked about you almost every day since you came back to Shiloh Springs. You leave without seeing her and it's gonna break her heart. Dad's too.”

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath before admitting, “I'm afraid. Not that they won't accept me, because I remember how loving and forgiving they are. I'm afraid I'll bring danger to their front door if I get involved with this family again. My life hasn't been a bed of roses and I've made



a lot of enemies. I do not want that part of my life ever coming close to touching any of you.”

“You do realize almost every one of us at one point or another has been involved in dangerous situations up to our eyeballs, right? Or maybe not, since you’ve been out of the loop. None of us has a pristine past, we’ve all got secrets. I get it, not wanting to bring somebody from your past that might be out for revenge anywhere near Momma and Dad. That’s a choice you and only you can make. But think long and hard before you cut them out of your life. Or the rest of us. We call ourselves a clan for a reason. We take care of each other, not because we have to, but because we want to. But if you’re going to walk away, do it now, before Momma gets her hopes up that you’ll come home to stay. The front door is open. It’s up to you whether you walk through or turn your back on the possibilities that Momma and Dad’s love offers. Your choice.”

Antonio clapped him on the shoulder and turned, taking a step toward the Big House.

The crack of the gunshot still echoed in Nick’s ears, as he replayed the events in slow motion in his mind. Antonio’s surprised expression. His hand lifting away from his chest coated with blood. Nick had caught him as he slumped to the ground, while Rafe and several other Boudreaus poured out through the front door.

While chaos reigned around him, he’d scanned the area, looking for the shooter while Antonio’s brothers had each surrounded their fallen brother, guns in hand. Funny, he hadn’t

expected all of them to be armed. Guess a lot had changed around the homestead.

“It’s not your fault.”

Nick’s head rose at the voice, finding Dane standing in front of him. He remembered Ms. Patti mentioning Dane now ran the ranch full time, while his brothers helped out when they could. Memories of getting up at five o’clock in the morning, rain or shine, when he’d been on the ranch flitted through his memory.

“Appreciate your saying that, but I have to disagree. That shot was meant for me.”

Dane eased onto the chair beside Nick’s. “You don’t know that for sure. I know you haven’t been around for a while, but most of us have some bad blood in our backgrounds, and we’ve garnered a few enemies of our own along the way. I’m not saying you’re wrong, but don’t jump to conclusions.”

Nick pulled in a deep breath and scrubbed his hands across his face. He was tired, beyond tired actually. Wrapping up the paperwork on this case, as well as being deposed while he was in Australia, so that he could come back to the States, he’d been surviving on grabbing sleep when he could and gallons of caffeine. He still wasn’t happy with the disposition of Brashear’s case, but it was out of his hands now. Of course, his boss and surrogate father figure, Grant Calvin, had been living. He’d wanted Brashear’s head on a pike in the middle of downtown. Nick’s lips turned up at the corners, thinking back to the tirade Calvin threw when he’d found out Brashear wasn’t going to be extradited back to Australia. Instead,

Brashear found himself at the not-so-tender mercies of the United States government, where he'd accepted a deal to spend the rest of his natural life behind the bars of a maximum security prison in exchange for taking the death penalty off the table.

Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. The number of lives Winston Brashear had destroyed couldn't even be calculated. Nick still felt dirty from having worked with the man for three years, building a case against him for the Australian secret police. While there was satisfaction in having done his job and helping end the tyranny of the despot, it was a sad fact that another cockroach would crawl up to take Brashear's place.

Before Nick could answer Dane, a physician walked through the doorway of the waiting room, and everyone sprang to their feet. With a quick glance around the room, the doc zeroed in on Douglas and Ms. Patti. Stepping closer to them, he spoke in a hushed tone. While he couldn't hear the conversation, watching Ms. Patti's body sag with relief was all the answer he needed.

Antonio would pull through.

As everyone gathered around the happy family, Nick took the opportunity to surreptitiously walk into the hall and pull out his cell phone. Hitting the speed dial for his boss, he waited to hear the gruff voice that was as familiar as his own.

“What?”

He almost smiled. The man never said hello or hi. If you wanted him, called him, it was always *what*.

“We’ve got a problem.”

He could almost hear Calvin’s sigh over the phone. “What kind of problem?”

“Somebody took a shot at me today.”

“I take it they missed.” Not are you alright, what do you need? That wasn’t his style, but Nick knew the older man would give his own life to keep him safe.

“Missed me. Hit Antonio Boudreau. He’s just out of surgery.”

“He gonna make it?”

“Seems like. Wondered if you might have a clue who took a potshot at me?”

Calvin gave a short bark of a laugh. “List is long, ain’t it?”

Nick had to agree. He’d made more than a few enemies over the years and put most of them behind bars.

“Who’s out who might be holding a grudge?”

“Let me check. I’ll get back to you. In the meantime, you watch your back. Can’t afford to lose you.”

Behind the gruff response, Nick knew his mentor and surrogate father meant I love you, just never came out and said those words. He’d shown it, though, over the last fifteen years.

“Thanks. I’m going to stick around here for a bit, make sure Antonio’s going to be okay. Do a bit of nosing around; see if I can get a handle on who might be after me.”

“Good. Let me know if I need to head to the States. You know I’ve always got your back.”

“I do. I’ll be in touch.”

Disconnecting the call, he turned back toward the waiting room, and noticed Douglas standing not far away, watching him intently. Though there was no judgment in his gaze, guilt ate at him, because he knew Douglas had figured out the bullet that hit his son had been meant for Nick.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY Bestselling author Kathy Ivan spent most of her life with her nose between the pages of a book. It didn't matter if the book was a paranormal romance, romantic suspense, action, and adventure thrillers, sweet & spicy, or a sexy novella. Kathy turned her obsession with reading into the next logical step, writing.

Her books transport you to the sultry splendor of the French Quarter in New Orleans in her award-winning romantic suspense, or to Las Vegas in her contemporary romantic comedies. Kathy's new romantic suspense series features, Texas Boudreau Brotherhood, features alpha heroes in small town Texas. Gotta love those cowboys!

Kathy tells stories people can't get enough of, reuniting old loves, betrayal of trust, finding kidnapped children, psychics and sometimes even a ghost or two. But one thing they all have in common – love with a happily ever after).

More about Kathy and her books can be found at

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