

Chapter Three



There weren't too many things that left Trevor flustered, trained as he was to school his reactions in almost any scenario.

All of that abandoned him in a nanosecond when the woman in green scrubs walked into the pristine stall.

"Luke," she said. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"S'okay, Doc," his uncle answered. "We just got here."

Powerless to do anything else, Trevor's gaze followed her to a counter on the opposite wall. This was Kinsley Talbot? Eli's little sister, with the always-messy red pigtails and freckles?

She'd moved miles past that, now all grown up with ginger curls in a bouncing ponytail perched high on her head. Her emerald-hued scrubs accentuated her lithe figure and green eyes. She radiated accomplishment and authority.

Those stunning jade eyes met his. "Trevor. Good to see you."

"Hi," was all the response his brain could muster.

"When did you get in?" She plucked two latex gloves out of a box. "I didn't see you at church yesterday."

"Afternoon. Late." He cleared his throat. "Came in late yesterday afternoon."

When she nodded and turned her attention to her patient, he caught his uncle's amused grin. Way to make a smashing impression.

"Tell me about Bayberry," she said to Uncle Luke.

While his uncle described the mare's behavior that morning,

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Kinsley rubbed her gloved hands along the horse's flank and under her belly, pressing into the flesh. Bayberry lurched to the side with a harsh whinny.

"Shh, girl." Trevor held on to her halter to prevent her from thrashing her head. "It's gonna be okay."

After a thorough examination—including the vet donning an arm-length glove for a procedure Trevor chose not to watch—Kinsley deposited the soiled gloves into a bin labeled *HAZARDOUS WASTE* and rinsed her hands in a small sink. "I'm sorry, Luke." Her face softened from the competent professional to the sympathetic neighbor. "You were right to bring her in when you did."

Uncle Luke's expression fell. "It's torsion?"

Charley handed her some paper towels as she nodded. "She'll need surgery immediately if she has any chance for survival."

Trevor's stomach rolled. Torsion. Twisting of the intestine. They'd had a horse with torsion when he was eleven. He hadn't survived the two-hour trip to the nearest surgical vet in Houston. Would Bayberry make it that long?

"I didn't think the worst until little less than an hour ago, when we caught her thrashing around on the ground. Knew I needed to get her to you right quick." He ran his hand over Bayberry's mane. "What are her odds, do you reckon?"

Shaking her head, she tossed the towels into another bin. "I don't like to give odds unless I feel strongly one way or the other. Torsion is serious, as you're aware. She could come out and completely recover. Or she could succumb on the table or in the days following. I'll give it all I have, Luke. You can rest assured."

"I always do when you're lookin' after my animals. And without you here, she'd die for sure before we got her to Houston."

Trevor furrowed his brow. "You can do the surgery here?"

She nodded. "I'm a surgical specialist, so we won't need to transport her." She turned to his uncle. "If she comes through surgery with no complications, she'll need to stay for recovery, including some light physical therapy. We have a large animal PT on retainer, and he's amazing. He may even get her in the rehab pool to work her out a bit until she's healed sufficiently to come home. Possibly three to four weeks."

Surgery. Physical therapy. Rehab pool. This impressive medical

barn. Talbot Veterinary Hospital had come a long way in the years since he'd last been here.

"Can you give me an estimated cost?"

"That's Charley's area."

As her cousin rattled off the numbers, Uncle Luke seemed to age by the minute, past his well-lived fifty-nine years. A few seconds ticked off before his uncle's gaze came his way.

"What do you think, Trev? She's nineteen. Foaled six times with no issues. A good ranch horse. But surgery. And rehab."

Trevor stared into Bayberry's pain-dulled eyes. During breakfast in town that morning, his uncle had said a couple of things that made him wonder if the ranch still stood as solid as it once had. They had insurance, but this surgery and the weeks in rehab would be well into the tens of thousands.

Kinsley dictated some notes to Charley—with words he couldn't spell if his life depended on it—who jotted them down on her e-tablet with a stylus. "We'll give you a few minutes to confer," she said before exiting the stall.

Still holding the horse's halter, he turned to his uncle once the ladies had left. "Will insurance cover most of it?"

"Seventy percent. But that extra thirty ... it'll be hefty."

Nodding, Trevor studied Bayberry's white blaze against her chestnut brown coat. A beautiful horse. A horse that could potentially live another ten years or longer, under the right conditions. "I was there when she was born. Got right up on her feet and never slowed down."

"You saddle-trained her, if memory serves."

"She took right to it. I spent a lot of hours riding the ranch on this horse."

"She missed you boys as much as we did when you left."

Trevor winced. "I should've been back. To see y'all. Spend some time on the ranch."

Shaking his head, Luke splayed his hands on his waist. "Your folks were down in Houston. Totally understood. And it's been nice comin' to the city to spend the holidays. Gives your aunt and me a break."

"I still should've come before now." He stroked Bayberry's neck to soothe a pain he couldn't fix. "I have some savings put away. Quite a

bit, actually. I have a truck payment and a mortgage on my condo. No other debt."

"No, no, I ain't takin' your money, son."

"I want to do it. Bay's a great horse. You said that until yesterday, she was as spry as she's ever been. If Kinsley can save her, she may live several more good years."

His uncle's brow creased as he pondered the mare pawing the ground, another sign of distress. If not for the restraints holding her up, she'd go down in an effort to relieve her pain. Like she'd been in her stall when they returned from breakfast in town.

"I'd sure hate to lose her. Not without a fight." Uncle Luke adjusted his hat. "All right. I'll give Doc Kinsley the go-ahead."

Trevor put his head against the horse's muzzle. "You hear that, girl? Doc Talbot's gonna fix you right up."

Charley walked back into the stall. "Doc Kinsley. Doc Talbot was what everybody called Uncle Jerod. She only uses it in formal or official settings."

"Doc Kinsley. I'll remember that."

"So, how do y'all want to proceed?"

Trevor paced the waiting area after dropping Uncle Luke at the ranch and returning in his own truck. Bay had been in surgery for an hour already, although he didn't expect to hear anything for a while yet. He couldn't just leave her, and his uncle had an Area Ranch Coalition meeting he had to chair this afternoon. With Aunt Naomi at a Christmas planning committee meeting with the church ladies, he felt compelled to sit it out.

If he could sit. All this time on his hands ... not good. He'd come to Bandry to *not* think. And that's all he'd done while pacing the waiting room.

Charley's voice drew his attention to the reception desk, where she stood beside a younger girl behind the counter. "That hay's still sitting out there on the trailer. We need to get it moved into the feed room before they pick up the flatbed tomorrow. Techs are all booked up. Do we have any volunteers scheduled to come in today after school lets out?"

The receptionist tossed her blonde pigtail over her shoulder. "Not until this weekend. We lost Bud and Cal when they left for A&M."

"All right. I'll see if Josh can come by after football practice tonight to unload it."

Trevor approached the counter. "Hey, Charley, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but do you need some hay moved? They say rain might be coming in a few hours, so I'd be happy to move it inside for y'all. Save your husband the extra work."

"Oh, I can't ask you to do that, Trev. Thank you, though."

"You're not asking. I'm volunteering. It'll give me something to do while I'm waiting."

She cocked her head. "You're sure?"

"Affirmative. Feed room in the same place?"

Her face brightened. "Same place. Some improvements since you left. Come on back. I'll walk you out." She opened the door between the waiting room and treatment area and waved him in. "We have bale hooks and gloves, and they're smaller bales so easily handled by one person." She shot him a grin as they ambled down the corridor. "If my husband the social studies teacher can do it, a former military police officer won't have any problem."

"It's been a few years." Actually, a bit more than that. He might've started out as military police, before his commanding officer mentioned he should consider selection for special operations. Something most people didn't know. "And if Josh is as big as he was when we played football, I'm sure he does fine."

Laughing, she led him outside. "Oh, he's as big, but not all muscle like it was back in the day."

"If you're as good a cook as your mom, I'm sure he eats very well."

"He hasn't complained."

A flagstone path came to a Y, and he followed her to the left toward the barn that had been there much longer than his thirty-four years. Where Doc Talbot had examined and treated animals too large for the small-animal clinic. The right led to the hospital barn he'd been in earlier. A new build since he'd last been here.

At the door, she punched a number into the keypad. "This is still the examination barn. A little improved since the last time you saw it."

Inside, his eyes widened. "Wow." A *little improved* was a massive

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understatement. Gone were the wood-framed stalls and the rough concrete floors covered in hay. Instead, a front office sat to the left, with flagstone flooring, a high counter and three stools, laptop stations, a printer, a whiteboard with sections for each patient, an overstuffed couch, two chairs, a coffee table, and another small room with a door marked *Pharmacy*. Several large portraits of horses, cattle, bluebonnets, and a rustic print of the Texas flag adorned the high walls. A comfortable space for staff to work and where owners waited while their animals were being treated.

“No kidding. This is amazing.”

They turned to the right. Shiny, stained concrete continued down a wide corridor with stalls of varying sizes and an assortment of animals on either side. Each stall had rubber flooring and a drain, and white subway tiles covered all four walls to shoulder height, then rustic red up to and across the beamed ceiling.

He let out a low whistle. “Nice set-up.”

“Kinsley’s completely renovated and brought in all new equipment. Since she’s certified as a surgical specialist, folks come from miles away for her services. The things Uncle Jerod didn’t do. All surgeries and radiology are done in the hospital barn, where patients stay post-surgery or for observation.”

A tech stood in a stall wrapping gauze around the hind leg of a foal as they neared the back of the barn.

“You’ve already seen the hospital intake stall, but we also have two ICU stalls. Four of our investors went in on a fully equipped truck for on-site care with our logo on the side. That’s half of our practice, so that truck’s been a huge game changer. Uncle Jerod would keep equipment and supplies in a box in the bed of his truck and load anything else based on the call. But this new one has a refrigerated compartment for pharmaceuticals, wireless ultrasound unit, and built-in cabinets for supplies. It can pull a trailer, or we have Uncle Jerod’s dually if we need to transport but do little or no treatment on-site.”

“This is all very impressive.” That little pigtailed girl, who had never met an animal, fish, amphibian, or reptile she was afraid of, had made all her dreams come true. And then some.

Outside, they walked around to a large shed sitting where the old, smaller one used to stand. A flatbed sat next to a loading dock,

weighed down by at least a couple dozen bales of hay. After showing him where to stack it inside, she handed him two bale hooks and a pair of work gloves.

"I noticed the feed bin is low but there are bags in there." He pulled on the gloves and flexed his fingers. "I can refill it, if that would help."

"If you're sure you don't mind."

"I don't mind. I'll also rearrange the bales so you can get to the older hay first."

"Thank you so much. This is a huge help."

"I'm on it. If there's anything else you want done, let me know."

"Great. I'll keep you posted on Bayberry if I hear anything. The fact we haven't so far is a good sign." She put her hand on his arm. "She's a strong horse. And Kins is the best. All of that and prayer mean she has an excellent chance."

"Keeping a good thought."

The sun blazed down on his bare shoulders some time later as he heaved another bale of hay off the flatbed and carried it into the feed room. Outside, he removed his cutter-style cowboy hat, swept his wrist across his forehead, and checked his watch. A little over two hours with three bales to go.

He chuckled when a curly-haired Goldendoodle ran up to him with her ball. The dog—whose tag identified her as Bonnie—had joined him an hour ago, allowing him to throw her ball a few times before settling down in the shade under the flatbed to watch him while he worked. She must belong to one of the staff but appeared perfectly content to stay with him, a total stranger.

He picked up the ball she'd dropped at his feet. "Okay, girl. Sit."

Tongue wagging, Bonnie sat, watching with expectation. He gave the ball a good throw, and she took off after it.

Hands on his hips, he took a full breath and let it out as he surveyed the lush green landscape beyond the barns. He'd needed the full-on physical labor to keep his body moving and mind occupied with something other than worrying about Bayberry.

Or the job. The one he wasn't sure he'd ever do again, whether Colton accepted his resignation or not. If he didn't return at the end of his leave, they'd have no choice.

Perhaps he should loop back to the police academy in Houston,

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and the job offer he'd passed on to join Petersen instead. Four years had passed since then, but he could at least inquire as to any current openings. As a trainer, he wouldn't be in the field. Wouldn't have other people's lives in his hands. He'd still get to do something he was good at—training others in special weapons and tactics—but no responsibility past that.

Would that job fulfill him as much as the work at Petersen did? Or had?

When Bonnie returned with her ball, he gave it another toss. The sun still shone bright while gray clouds gathered in the distance, and the scent of a coming rain mingled with hay and grass.

His phone dinged with an incoming text, and he pulled it out of the back pocket of his jeans.

COLTON: Checking in. How are you?

He stuck the tip of his index finger in his mouth and yanked off the glove to tap in his response. Best to keep his current whereabouts to himself for now to avoid Colton giving him an earful for leaving town and not following through with the counselor.

Doing well. Keeping busy.

COLTON: See you Friday?

I'll be there.

He couldn't—he wouldn't—miss it, even though a funeral was the last place he wanted to be. Not after attending three in quick succession four-and-a-half years ago.

COLTON: Praying for you, brother.

Appreciated.

He stuck the phone back in his pocket, put the glove on, and grabbed the bale hook. Over the past couple of days, he'd fielded texts from Piper, Mack, and several co-workers. He'd answered all of them, affirming his state of well-being if not precise about his current location.

With a shake of the head, he grabbed another bale. He'd drive into Houston on Friday for Stan's service, then come right back. No need to stop at his condo. Jeans, shirts fit for hard work, boots, and the hat he hadn't donned since the last time he and Gemma went line dancing were all the attire necessary.

When he'd packed yesterday after attending church with his family, the only other clothes he'd included were a pair of khakis, a nicer pair of jeans, a couple of polo shirts, two dress shirts, and one suit. A black one. For Friday.

He'd almost left his Glock behind but grabbed it at the last minute. Habit. He'd carried it almost every day of the last four years. Hadn't been without a weapon in his possession for the past sixteen. He'd have to get used to it, though, if he didn't return to Petersen.

On his way to the flatbed after stacking the final bale inside, he caught sight of Kinsley rounding the corner of the treatment barn. Sunlight glinting off her hair turned it to burnished copper. Last time he'd laid eyes on Kinsley Talbot, the day before he left for boot camp three weeks after graduation, she'd been gangly, a little awkward, but pretty nonetheless.

No awkwardness now in the woman coming toward him with the easy gait and slender figure. Although her modest scrubs concealed what no man had business imagining, anyway.

He gave himself an internal kick as he grabbed his discarded T-shirt off the flatbed and tugged it over his head. This was Kinsley. His boyhood best friend's little sister, no matter how good she'd grown up.

He hadn't been remotely interested in anybody since Gemma broke things off following his unfortunate run-in with a bullet last year, and now would be a terrible time to start. The rigors of the job made it difficult for significant others. Having to keep Stan's wife literally on her feet at the morgue had proved that fact.

No, he couldn't entertain interest when he had no idea what lay ahead in his future. If he'd be able to go back to the job he'd once loved, that he'd been *made for*, according to Colton.

Or if he'd have to find an entirely new direction for his life.