

Chapter Two



“Sell?” Kinsley gaped at her brother. “Our family land? Out of the question.”

“Why? We’d make a killing if we sold now.” Eli squinted in the midday sun outside the veterinary hospital their father had founded. “This is prime real estate. Developers are swarming like bees. Have bought up most of the acreage within fifty miles of Bandry.”

“The Paxtons haven’t sold, and I’m sure Luke has no plans to.”

“He might not have a choice. I hear things aren’t going so good over there.”

She’d heard the same, but knowing Luke Paxton, he’d turn things around. She didn’t know a better rancher. And the Paxtons had been there for three generations now, almost as long as her family. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not selling. I’ve invested too much into this place to walk away now.”

“You can take all this newfangled equipment and set up practice anywhere. And still have some money to squirrel away for the future.”

“It’s not only the practice.” She planted her hands on her hips. “This is our land. Talbot land. Has been for a hundred and fifty years. I can’t believe you’d dare suggest selling. If Daddy were here—”

“Well, he isn’t, is he? And he left majority share of the property to my *little* sister. You cheated me once, Kins. You owe me.”

Her jaw dropped. “I never cheated you. That was Daddy’s decision. I had no knowledge of it until two weeks before he passed.”

"I'd have appreciated it if someone had informed *me* I was being undercut."

"Eli." She released a sigh. "I'm sorry Daddy never talked to you. I assumed he had. But with the clinic sitting here almost four decades, and with all the money I've sunk into it, he knew I'd protect it. Guess he had good reason to worry. He's been gone ten months, and you're already talking about selling."

"Dad was a great vet. Not a great businessman. Guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say."

The back of her neck tingled, like hackles on a dog. "This has nothing to do with business. It's greed. And I'm done talking about it."

Turning on her heel, she stalked toward the side door of the clinic.

"Kinsley." Gravel crunched behind her. "Kins, wait."

"I have patients."

"I'm in trouble." His footsteps halted. "A quarter million dollars' worth."

She stopped and turned as if bracing herself against a gale. A horse nickered in the paddock next to the hospital barn. A breeze blew across her face but failed to squelch the heat climbing up her neck. "Say that again?"

"I got in a little over my head at the casino in Lake Charles."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a tad more than a little over your head."

"Not my fault. I went with some friends to New Orleans a couple of weeks ago. They wanted to hit the casinos in Lake Charles on the way home and dragged me into a high-stakes poker game." He shrugged. "I thought I had it nailed down. That I'd win it back."

Lake Charles. A good three hours from New Orleans. Plenty of time to choose *not* to slide back into old habits.

And he always laid the blame at somebody else's feet. His so-called friends, the casino, the dealer, the cards themselves. Everyone but Eli appeared to have a say in how much he gambled away.

"A legal game?"

He shrugged. "You say tomato, I say—"

"I get it. Which makes this a *you* problem."

A tech walked out of the clinic and jogged their direction. "Luke Paxton called. He's bringing Bayberry in. Found her rolling in her stall."

Sanctuary and Sabotage

"Probably colic." Not good news. Not for Luke. Not for Bayberry. "Thank you, Athena. Please prep the intake stall in the hospital barn. Secure the horse when she arrives, start IV fluids and administer a light sedative for pain. Charley can do the intake while you're doing that."

"Yes, Doctor."

Kinsley glowered at her brother as Athena broke into a run to the hospital barn. "I don't have time for this now. But you need to hear me, Eli. I am not selling. End of discussion." She turned on her heel toward the office.

"Kinsley—"

"Not. Selling."

"I'll come by tonight," he called after her when she opened the door. "We can talk when you're not so busy."

Rolling her eyes, she let the door close behind her. Eli had perfectly good hearing. It was the listening he hadn't mastered.

"Kins-Kins-Kins." Charlotte, her business partner—and cousin—raced down the hall, her face lit up and shoulder-length brown curls bouncing. "You'll never guess who I saw in town this morning. At the diner."

"What were you doing at the diner?"

"It's Monday. Couldn't pass up Miss Kay's two-for-one, start-your-week-out-right donut special. Picked up something for the entire staff. Your chocolate éclair with fudge cream and white chocolate drizzle is sitting on your desk. But that's not the best part. You'll never guess who I saw."

"Zac Efron? Marley's ghost?" Which would be as likely as a visit from Zac Efron. "Am I anywhere close?"

"Better."

The receptionist peered around the patient check-out counter, holding her hand over the base of the phone. "Doc Kinsley."

"Yes?"

"The Paxton horse is pulling up. Hospital or treatment barn?"

"Hospital loading bay, please. Athena's prepping the intake stall there so we won't have to transfer her if surgery is required."

Caroline nodded and relayed the instructions to the rancher.

"You want me to do the intake?" Charley asked, now unsmiling and brow creased.

“Yes, please. I’ll be out in a few minutes to assess her.”

“On it.” Her cousin continued down the hall while Kinsley went into her office.

She still didn’t know who Charley’s mystery sighting had been, but she had no doubt she’d hear about it at some point.

Seated behind the desk, she took the éclair out of a small pink box and practically moaned as the chocolate-times-three pastry lit up her taste buds. She took another bite and read over the horse’s medical history on her laptop. Over her nineteen years, Bayberry had never presented for colic before. Hopefully, if not too far progressed, they could resolve it with intravenous fluids and pain meds to keep her comfortable.

But Luke’s horse being unloaded into the hospital barn at this moment meant he suspected something more serious than colic. If the mare had torsion, she would require emergency surgery, which meant Kinsley’s schedule for the next several hours just went out the window.

Including lunch. Thank the Lord for Charley, Miss Kay, and chocolate éclairs.

Her phone pinged with an incoming text.

| Charley: bayberry’s ready

on my way |

She closed the laptop, jogged down the hall while finishing her pastry, and exited the side door that led to the outdoor buildings. When she entered the hospital barn with the sparkling, pewter-stained concrete floor, Charley walked out of stall four at the other end and met her halfway.

“Kins, hold on.” Charley grabbed her arm to stop her.

“What?”

“Wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“Regarding Bayberry?”

Charley shook her head. “That person I saw this morning?”

“I don’t have time right—”

“Trevor’s here.”

Kinsley would’ve sworn her heart stopped, had she not known

Sanctuary and Sabotage

such a thing to be medically impossible while still breathing. “Don’t mess with me, Charley.”

“Not messing with you.”

She swallowed as her heart picked up speed. A minute ago, her pulse had been at a calm, normal rate, even with Bayberry’s possible surgery ahead of her. But a minute ago, she hadn’t known Trevor Paxton had returned to little Bandry, Texas.

Somehow, she made her feet move again. “What do we know?”

“No wedding ring.” Charley turned to walk beside her. “And he looks good. Really good.”

“About Bayberry, Charley.”

“Oh. Right.” She consulted the e-tablet she held. “Luke found her rolling in her stall when they got back from town, clearly in a lot of pain. He got her on her feet and checked her belly. Hard and distended.”

“Definitely sounds like torsion.”

As they neared the stall, a man’s low timbre caught her ear, causing pinpricks along her skin. Didn’t matter that she hadn’t heard it in sixteen years. “It’s okay, girl. The doc’ll fix you right up.”

He glanced over his shoulder when they entered. And what breath she had in her body lodged in her lungs.

Maybe her schoolgirl crush on the cute boy from the neighboring ranch still lingered, closer than she dared admit.