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## Texas Hill Country

**AVERY ELLIOTT SPURRED HER HORSE** across one of the thirty-five thousand rolling acres of the Brazos River Ranch in the blazing heat. The sultry August wind blew through her hair, bathing her damp face and shoving aside her pensive mood. Granddad had told her once that if he could lasso the wind, he'd ride that bronc to eternity. She'd framed the saying and placed it in the reception area of their office.

Granddad had left at dawn to ride fence and enjoy some solitude and think time. His work habits overruled his stomach, which meant he wouldn't stop to eat until he'd inspected a recently repaired stretch. Then the Internet had gone down ending her morning's work. A good excuse for her to get away from the office and spend special time with him.

She lightly grasped the reins of the most wonderful quarter horse on the planet and the perfect cure-all for the morning's frustration. Closing her eyes, Avery allowed Darcy's rhythmic gallop to soothe her.

Avery slowed the mare to a walk and twisted her phone from her jeans pocket. Pressing on Granddad's name in Favorites, she breathed in the sweltering heat and envisioned him fumbling for his phone.

"Mornin', sweet girl."

"Can I treat you to a five-star restaurant for lunch?" He chuckled. "You'll have to fly in the prime rib."

"I've packed us a picnic, and I'm on my way to meet you. Just say where."

"Drivin' or ridin'?"

"You've hurt Darcy's feelings."

“Give her my apologies. I’m west of the river about a mile from the family cemetery. Should be a nice breeze there this morning. We could talk and have lunch with your grandma.”

“Good. I’d planned to stop at her grave while I was out.” The oaks bordering the family plots would offer relief from the hundred-degree temps. With the abundance of summer rain, the area brimmed with green and vibrant wildflowers. “I’ll make sure she has flowers on her grave.”

“Not a day goes by that I don’t think about her. Guess I’m a sentimental old man who never got over his first love.”

Someday Avery wanted the same kind of love. She remembered the woman with warm brown eyes and a loving touch who fell prey to a stroke nearly fifteen years ago and never recovered. “You’re not a sentimental old man but one who misses his wife and best friend.”

“I see her in you.” He sighed. “You have a spirit of strength deep in your heart. Others think you’re quiet—until you’re riled. Then you’d give the devil a run for his money.”

“I hope I can always live up to that strength.”

“You already have. One day you’ll make the right man proud.” “Haven’t found him yet.”

“Time’s just not right. So when will you get here?”

Avery studied the familiar landmarks—thoroughbred horses grazing to the south and cattle taking advantage of the Brazos River. Why anyone would choose to live away from nature’s beauty made little sense to her. “About thirty minutes.”

“You didn’t bring tofu and carrot sticks? Mia’s new diet is killing me. The doctor doesn’t need to worry about my cholesterol or weight because she’s starving me.”

Avery laughed. “No. I packed ham and cheese, jalapeño-bacon potato salad, fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, and apple pie. You can eat light this evening.”

“I have a political dinner at six o’clock and a deacon meeting at seven thirty. Hey, how did you get the forbidden food past Mia?”

“She was upstairs while I hurried in the kitchen.” Their housekeeper and cook had entered the back side of her sixties and refused to slow down, but Granddad and Avery kept trying. Both knew better than to tell Mia to cut back on her pace unless they were looking to be chased down the road with buckshot in their rears. Granddad had no room to talk. He faced the big seven-oh in October, and he’d made no plans to ease back.

She slipped the phone back into her jeans pocket and hurried Darcy on. Avery wanted to arrive at the picnic site well before Granddad and have lunch set out for him.

Her thoughts crept back to the accounting issue from this morning. A work problem had made another moment at the ranch office torture, and getting away from the computer served as the perfect antidote. In examining Elliott Commercial Construction's records before the auditors arrived next week, she'd found a discrepancy. A paid bill for materials was much lower than it should have been. Why hadn't she seen this weeks ago at the completion of the Lago de Cobre Dam? The original bid for the project included the cost to supply additional rock and expand the footprint, footers, and other foundational elements to compensate for the soft ground. Those materials were ordered, canceled, and still the specs showed the work had been completed per the contract.

She'd contacted the material's supply company, and the accounting manager confirmed they'd invoiced what they supplied. Yet Avery's files didn't reflect a different supplier for the required foundation, as though Granddad had substituted inferior materials or hadn't followed the specs. He'd never sacrifice safety. Even the idea scraped raw against her conscience.

A call had gone to Craig, the foreman, but only voice mail greeted her. The accounting mess would drive her nuts until she resolved it, but she'd have to wait. Granddad would laugh at her fears about the dam's potentially faulty construction and explain the discrepancy. Accurate details ruled her thoughts, and perfectionism had a way of eating at her logic. A lot of good her Ivy League education accomplished when the numbers didn't add up.

Granddad said Avery shared his insight and discernment. The ability took practice, prayer, and purpose—his favorite three *p's* as though he'd outlined a sermon. But Granddad was wrong. She must have made a mistake, and the error warred within her.

Avery rode the path to the family cemetery. Elliotts had owned this property and been buried there before Texas became a state. Irish, English, and Scottish heritage—hard workers and fighters for faith, family, and freedom. Which had a lot to do with Granddad's name, Dad's, and hers—Avery Quinn Elliott, respectively Senior, Junior, and whatever that made her. Fortunately, Granddad went by Quinn or Senator, Dad went by Buddy, and she was simply Avery. Proud family and heritage, although Dad and Mom slipped in applying all three traits of being an Elliott.

Not going there today. After spending time with Granddad and finding out the source of her accounting problem, she—

A shot rang out from the direction of the cemetery.

She dug her heels into Darcy's side and bolted ahead. Had Granddad met up with a wild pig, a rattler, or even a two-legged varmint? The latter caused her to slow the mare and circle a grove of trees. If she needed her Sig, the firearm rested in a saddlebag beside the packed lunch. Granddad wasn't in sight. Only his stallion.

She dismounted and grabbed her gun. Tying Darcy to a slender oak, Avery moved closer to the iron gate of the cemetery entrance and prayed he hadn't been hurt. How had he been a mile west of here when she called him?

Hesitant to call out for him and draw the shooter's attention to her, she hid behind an oak. A riderless motorcycle—a shiny, blue Yamaha Tracer 9 GT—had parked in the shadow of more trees outside the far edge of the iron fence, a few yards from a worn path leading to the main road.

On the opposite side of the cemetery, Granddad bent over a man, whose blood stained his chest and pooled on the ground. He felt for a pulse and lifted his head to the cloudless sky. In Granddad's gloved right hand rested a gun. He shoved the weapon into his front belt and lifted his phone to his ear.

“He's dead. This has to end.” Granddad scanned the area, no doubt searching for someone. “I want Avery kept out of this, but I'm expecting her in the next twenty minutes.” He kicked the dirt with the toe of his boot. “He parked on the road and walked back. She isn't to know about any of it. I'll handle the situation on my end. . . . Yes, I'll be careful and not let the authorities know what happened. Look, I need to move his body out of sight. He was a friend, one of the best. I despise where this has gone.” Granddad waved his hand. “I told you Avery won't be a problem.”

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