

Chapter One

If today had been a fish, Sunny Carmichael would've pitched it right back into the water.

She swept up the broken water glass and dumped it into the trash can, adding the clear shards to the shattered jelly jar already there. The jar's sticky contents lay smeared over the crumpled paper plates and napkins like a gooey mosaic decorating the den.

Putting away the broom, she noticed that her Doc Martens made sucking noises on the faux marble floor. *Oh, well*, she thought, sitting down at the kitchen table. She wasn't the greatest housecleaner. Animals were her forte.

Simba lumbered over and rested his huge head on her knee, looking up at her with velvety brown eyes that had snagged her the moment she'd seen him in the pound four years ago, surrounded by a litter of kittens. Part Labrador retriever, part Irish Wolfhound, and part who-knows-what, he was roughly the size of a month-old colt, with a tail that could knock a bull on his butt in one exuberant swoop, and a canine smile that apologized beforehand for his clumsiness.

"What's next, Simba? Mama says things break in threes. We've had two in one day..." She patted Simba's wide skull. "Three, if you count Michael."

Michael Lawrey had been her fiancé for the past two years—until three days ago, when he'd dumped her. Wealthy, passably handsome and powerful, he was on a political climb with an eye toward the governor's seat.

Evidently, he'd decided she no longer fit in with his plans.

Sunny stared at the sticky floor, but couldn't work up the energy to do anything about it. She was bored and vaguely upset, when she should have been totally torn up. After all, the man she was to marry had chucked her. Something was wrong that she felt more embarrassed and inadequate than heartbroken.

She wasn't sure what to do with herself. Here she was on a beautiful summer Saturday evening, sitting alone in a plush condo in Malibu.

Finding herself all alone felt weird. The condo was quiet. The right side of both the bathroom cabinet and bedroom closet were empty. Michael had always stored his personal items for the nights he stayed over on the right because he was left-handed. He claimed it gave him more elbow room to brush his teeth, blow-dry his hair and dress.

“Why in the world didn’t I object to the way he’d taken over?” she asked Simba. “It’s my house. Maybe I would have preferred the right side.”

Simba’s tongue snaked out to lick her wrist. His eyes darted away as though he had no idea who’d delivered that sandpapery slobbering caress. It was a vice she’d yet to break him from. Like a chocoholic sneaking sugar, Simba sneaked licks.

Lately, he was the only mammal she cuddled, and that seemed wrong. Her love of animals was part of her life, a soul connection, deep and profound. It was what had compelled her to become a veterinarian in the first place.

The phone rang, and Sunny jumped. She didn’t immediately answer, even considered letting the machine pick up. By damn, she wasn’t up to a pity call now—or talking to some shallow gossipmonger spouting false concern just to get the skinny on what had happened between her and Michael.

By the time she got to the phone, the machine had switched on. The sound of her mother’s heavy Texas drawl made her stomach lurch.

Just what she needed. A lecture from her mom on the merits of hanging on to a man. Still, nothing said she had to tell her mother about the breakup. Anna Carmichael was clear over in Austin. It wasn’t as if she would know what was going on in Los Angeles.

Sighing, Sunny finally reached for the receiver. “I’m here, Mama,” she said, cutting off Anna in mid-syllable.

“Oh, I’m so glad I caught you at home. This being a Saturday night, I worried you and Michael would be out.”

“Michael’s out.” *Literally.* “I’m not.” *Obviously.*

Anna paused. “Is everything all right? Are you and Michael having troubles?”

Sunny sighed again. Trust her mother to hone in on the “man” angle. Accurately this time, damn it. She ought to keep her mouth shut, but knew she wouldn’t. Some strange failing inside her made her feel that she was sinning if she didn’t admit every little thing to her mother.

“Michael and I are splitsville.”

“Excuse me?”

“We broke up.”

“Oh, Sunny. What did you do?”

“Me?” Her voice trembled despite her efforts to keep it even. “Why do you assume it’s something *I* did?”

“Perhaps I stated that poorly. You misunderstood.” Sunny didn’t think so. She’d spent twenty-nine years trying to measure up to her mother’s expectations and Southern standards of what a woman should be. She didn’t think she’d hit the mark yet.

“Sunny?” Anna said when the silence stretched. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine, Mama.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“There’s not much to say. Michael and I were trying to mesh our calendars and carve out a convenient time for a honeymoon, but he seemed to have a conflict with every date I chose.” More likely, he hadn’t *wanted* to take time off. He’d reminded her that they were both aiming for the top of their respective fields, and it was imperative that they not let the competition get there first.

“He *is* busy, Sunny.”

She felt her insides clench, but continued on with the conversation. “Yes, but so am I. Which is neither here nor there at the moment, since there won’t be a honeymoon, anyway.”

“Is this a problem the two of you might overcome?”

Sunny leaned against the kitchen counter. “No, Mama. Despite what you might think of me and my single status, I do want children and a family someday. Michael doesn’t.”

“Not at all?” Anna sounded scandalized.

Sunny found she could smile after all. Her mother believed in family, reminded Sunny and her brother, Storm, at every opportunity that she wanted to be a grandmother, that it wasn’t fair Trudy Fay Simon continually lorded it over her about her fifth grandchild when Anna had yet to claim even one.

“Not at all,” Sunny echoed.

“Well. I knew that man wasn’t right for you in the first place. He had one of those phony-politician smiles. His teeth were simply too perfect”

Sunny felt her heart soften. She and her mother had had their trials, but when it came down to it they were family. And even if they didn’t often agree, family stuck together.

“He paid a fortune so those teeth *would* be perfect.”

“Figures. So what will you do now?”

“Actually, I’ve taken some vacation time so I don’t have to answer a lot of questions.”

“Then I called at the right moment. Come home, Sunny. Your room’s just as you left it.”

Returning home was an ongoing argument, one they had often. Anna didn’t seem to respect or place any importance on what Sunny did in California. “You know I can’t—”

“You must. We’ve got trouble and we need you in Hope Valley. You’re the only one we can trust to handle it.”

Sunny was momentarily speechless. Her mother had admitted a need. That was a first.

But Sunny could only focus on the words *Hope Valley*. Her hometown was a blip on the Texas map. It lay just west of Austin, where verdant grass carpeted the ground in a feast for the eyes, and livestock grazed contentedly on ranches that ranged from small family operations to million-dollar enterprises. The town was quaint, and truly Southern in attitude. Everyone knew everyone else’s business, and the townsfolk accepted it as their God-given right to pass along every morsel of gossip that came their way.

Sunny had been born and raised in Hope Valley. Her family and her childhood friends were there. She’d lived and laughed and loved there.

And she’d had her heart broken there.

What she felt now after her split with Michael was nothing compared to the devastation she’d suffered in Hope Valley ten years earlier.

She twisted the phone cord around her finger and closed her eyes for a moment to steady herself. Simba, who’d been lying on the cool kitchen floor, scrambled to his feet and pushed against her leg in his canine version of a hug. How this goofy-looking dog was so attuned to her every emotion was uncanny.

“What kind of trouble?”

“On Jack Slade’s ranch. Now, hear me out,” Anna said, obviously knowing Sunny was about to object. They’d made a shaky deal years ago not to discuss Jackson Slade. Anna didn’t always keep up her end of the bargain. Especially when Hope Valley had been close to economic ruin and Jack had returned to town like a prodigal son. He’d taken over his father’s ranch and turned it into a highly prosperous spread.

From the moment he’d come back to the small community, everything he touched seemed to thrive. Where once he’d been a motorcycle-riding, earring-wearing, bronc-busting heartbreaker, now he was Hope Valley’s golden boy, and there were very few people around

these parts who weren't eternally grateful to him. According to Anna Carmichael, the guy had single-handedly made the town flourish once more.

Of course, Anna rarely missed a chance to remind her daughter what she'd given up.

Sunny rubbed her temples where a headache was forming. "I'm listening."

"This is for your ears only, and it could well be nothing."

"What, Mama?" She wasn't in the mood for a whispering campaign.

"Jack's had some cattle up and die on him. We don't want Hope Valley splashed across the national newspapers, with speculations on mad cow disease or something."

Her fingers tightened on the receiver. "Does Jack think it's mad cow?" The thought was horrifying. So far, livestock in the United States had escaped that epidemic. More than likely her mother was only using the term because it was familiar.

"I don't know, dear. That's why I'm calling you."

"How many cattle?"

"One or two, I think."

"Only in Jack's herd?"

"So I've heard."

"What does the vet say? What are the symptoms?"

"Honestly, Sunny, I'm not the one to be asking these questions. You need to come see for yourself."

"The vet, Mama..." she prompted.

Anna sighed. "Doc Levin skipped town. We have no earthly idea why. Just packed up his belongings and that young lady he'd taken up with, and left us high and dry. And it's just as well, if you ask me. He never did fit in. We need one of our own here, Sunny. Someone who cares about us. To investigate, to get to the bottom of this sudden illness, give us an unbiased report so we can handle it quickly among ourselves."

That was how the people of Hope Valley had always operated. As a community. "If it's just a couple of steers, that's hardly an epidemic. Still, you know I'm bound by law to report any outbreaks of infectious diseases once they're confirmed."

"Yes, I'm aware of all that, and I'm certainly not advocating we hide anything. But we can trust you not to jump the gun. You're the best there is, Sunny Leigh. The only one who can do this. We don't want to be gettin' the wrong dog by the tail and startin' an uproar of hysteria."

Sunny slid down the kitchen cabinet and sat on the floor. Her heart pounded and her brain felt fuzzy.

You're the best there is, Sunny Leigh.

How many years had she yearned to hear those words? Words of acceptance. Of praise. From her mother.

This was truly out of character for Anna. Sunny had rarely gotten more than a "That's nice, dear" when she'd called home with career news.

Now Jack was in trouble. It bugged her that even after all these years, Anna's immediate concern was for him, not her own daughter. But this was the first time her mother had reached out to her, hinted at pride in Sunny's successes, recognition for the professional she'd become, acceptance of the choices she'd made.

You're the only one who can do this. Powerful words to a woman who'd longed for years to hear them.

Sunny looped her arm around Simba's thick neck. She had a month's vacation and comp time coming to her. Lord knows her life in Los Angeles hadn't turned out the way she'd thought it would.

She could use some weeks away, time to reflect on the influence her relationship with Michael had had on who she'd become.

Because if she was truthful, she'd have to admit that what she'd started out wanting in the beginning had morphed into something entirely different.

She needed to clear her head. Go back to chasing *her* dream. Learn to be a woman who stood firmly on her own two feet, made solid decisions based on the facts as she saw them, and stuck by them.

And by God, the lure of *showing* her mother her expertise was too great to ignore.

Plus, the opportunity to connect with *true* friends, the kind you could always depend on, was a draw she couldn't resist.

Sunny, Donetta Presley, Tracy Lynn Randolph and Becca Sue Ellsworth had called themselves the Texas Sweethearts. They'd formed their secret society when they were kids. Even years and miles hadn't dampened their bond. Seeing her pals again would be good.

"I'll square things away here and be out there by Wednesday," she said.

The problem was, if an infectious disease was plaguing Jackson Slade's cattle, even Wednesday might be too late to save his herd.

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The Texas sun beat down on her like flames from hell. A straw Western hat shaded her blond hair, but her T-shirt and jeans felt as though they'd been shrink-wrapped to her body.

Irritated, Sunny imagined ten different scenarios of how she'd kill her mother. She'd been under the impression that Jack's ranch was in crisis. But when she'd arrived at the Forked S ten minutes ago and gone in search of Jack, there didn't appear to be a speck of tension in the air. And none of the hands gave any indication that they recognized her or expected her.

Peachy.

In fact, she'd been told that Jack wasn't even there, although he was due any minute.

"Meddling," she said to the huge dog at her side. "Mama's the Texas state champion at it. I'd lay odds that the minute she discovered Michael was out of the picture, her Southern-lady, all-good-girls-should-be-married-and-settled engine went into overdrive."

Simba raised his head and gave her a goofy look of agreement, his pink tongue snaking out to bathe her arm with a fast lick.

If matchmaking was Anna's game, Sunny would let her know right quick that she was pulling the wrong sow's ear. Never mind that it was fairly typical behavior. Men always came first with Anna Carmichael. It was in the Southern code. Heck, ten years ago, she'd even advised Sunny to turn a blind eye to Jack's betrayal.

Fat chance. That wasn't Sunny's style. And right now, she'd had it with men. The only male she intended to let close was Simba.

She looped her arm around the dog's neck. Since his wide skull came nearly to her chest, she was able to affectionately hug him for his loyal show of support without bending over.

"See any signs of an airplane yet?"

Simba ignored her question and snapped at a grasshopper that had the misfortune to fly in front of his face.

Instead of watching the private airstrip where Jackson would land, Sunny looked out over the ranch, disregarding the oppressive smell of manure and the stirred-up dust.

The Forked S was some operation, not at all as she'd remembered it from ten years ago. Back then this acreage had been owned by a man who cared more about his next bottle of whiskey than increasing his herd or repairing the outbuildings.

Cattle milled in pens, some bawling as they were squeezed through chutes leading into the corral. Others, dotting the verdant land, munched happily on the feathery grass swaying in the hot summer wind.

Ranch hands in dusty hats, boots and jeans all seemed to have jobs to do and took their duties seriously. No one lazed around smoking in the shade or tipping an icy beer behind the barn.

Evidently, the boss man ran a tight operation.

Sunny took a breath and choked on the cloying, dusty air. Standing in the middle of a ranch that held myriad memories she had no desire to confront was the last thing she'd ever expected to be doing.

She ought to be in Tahiti, floating on a raft in a clear blue bay, drinking sweet, potent concoctions with little umbrellas stuck in a pineapple garnish and licking her emotional wounds in comfort and style.

The drone of a plane engine sent Simba prancing to his feet.

"Yes, I hear it, boy." Sunny shaded her eyes with her hand and watched as a flashy Cessna descended in the blue sky, wings dipping ever so slightly from side to side as the pilot aimed for the short runway. The landing gear seemed about to brush the treetops, and Sunny held her breath. She let it out when the tail cleared the foliage by inches and the Cessna touched down as softly as dandelion fluff. Typical of a hotshot pilot at the controls, Jackson barely slowed the single engine, blue-and-white plane before putting it into a turn and bringing it around.

"Show-off," she muttered, impressed despite herself. She appreciated skill, admired a person who strove to be the best.

The engine shut off and the two-blade propeller jerked to a stop like a whirligig with a child's finger suddenly thrust into it. After several minutes, the door popped open and Jackson climbed out. He jumped down lithely onto the sticky asphalt, where heat-wave mirages danced over the black surface.

Sunny's heart pumped and sweat trickled down her spine. She was about to come face-to-face with her past.

But she could handle it. She *would* handle it. She'd spent ten long years building a shield around her heart. And a one-month vacation in Texas wasn't going to tear it down.

For a moment he paused, watching her from a distance of one hundred yards. She couldn't see past the aviator sunglasses to his blue eyes, couldn't gauge his mood from his expression because he wore his tobacco-brown Stetson pulled low over his forehead.

Good granny's goose, Jackson Slade still made her mouth water.

Six feet four inches of bad attitude, he drew women like flies to a watermelon, and radiated a masculinity that made a girl want to swoon like a Southern belle of old.

However, Sunny wasn't a Southern belle. Southern, yes, but as much as her mother had tried, her manners were at times abysmal. And swooning wasn't her style.

After the briefest hesitation, he headed toward her, his stride long and loose. If he felt a sense of urgency, it didn't show. Nor did recognition.

That poked at her pride.

Then again, Jackson Slade was a master at hiding his emotions.

He stopped in front of her and stared down at her. As she craned her neck to meet his gaze, the bright sunshine behind him made her eyes water. He shifted subtly so that his body blocked the light. It also crowded her. Deliberately, it seemed.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Sunny Leigh Carmichael."

Damn it, that deep Texas drawl still made her stomach hatch butterflies. She kept her hand on Simba. Not that she was afraid the hound would attack. She didn't think Jack would appreciate Simba's obsession for giving sloppy dog kisses just now.

"Good memory, Slade." She couldn't tell if he was surprised to see her or annoyed.

"You back in town for a visit, sugar bear?"

"Maybe." She wanted him to take off those dark glasses so she could see if he was mocking her. Sugar bear had been his pet name for her all those years ago, at a time when she was certain he'd loved her, certain he'd intended to ask her daddy's permission for her hand in marriage. Well, Daddy was gone now, and Jack had ended up marrying someone else.

"Been a lot of years," he commented, and stepped back. "Any other time I'd be happy to socialize some, but I've got a cow with a possible prolapsed uterus. She's one of my best breeders and if I don't get in there right quick, I'll lose her." His tone implied he was happy for an excuse *not* to be sociable. With her.

Astonished, she stood for several seconds and gaped at his back as he walked away.

Who the heck had put a burr up his behind? The man had cheated on her ten years ago and had had a child with another woman, while Sunny had nursed a bone-deep hurt and pined—yes, damn it, *pined*—for him.

If *anyone* should be acting bitchy here, it should be her!

Miffed by his attitude, she considered leaving. But her conscience as a veterinarian forced her to stay.

If Jack's dead cattle turned out to be nothing more than routine, she was off the hook. In the meantime, she'd made a promise to her mother to look into the matter. And when Sunny made a promise, she didn't break it.

Unlike Jackson Slade.