

Chapter One

Sometimes a woman had to take charge of her own destiny. Tracy Lynn Randolph was doing just that.

Above her, puffy clouds cast huge shadows over the Texas hills, the sky so blue it almost hurt to look at it. A brisk November wind ruffled the spiky seed pods on the sweet-gum tree, scattering little sticker balls over the lawn and onto the steps of the redbrick courthouse.

Even if it hadn't been such a glorious afternoon, nothing could have dampened Tracy Lynn's mood. Her smile far outshone any smile she'd perfected in the dozen or so beauty pageants she'd entered in her youth. She pressed a hand to her chest as if to contain her giddy excitement.

Pausing at the base of the Hope Valley courthouse steps, she closed her eyes and sent her thoughts heavenward.

Mama, are you watching? I'm finally starting on my dream. Our dream.

Her heart squeezed and her throat ached as she remembered the words her mother had uttered just hours before succumbing completely to the aggressive ovarian cancer that had been draining the life from her once-vibrant body for the past eight months.

"Give Daddy grandbabies," Mama had said, her voice weak yet steady. "You were the only child I was able to have, and he so wanted a big family."

"I will, Mama. Before I'm thirty."

In those last few weeks they'd planned Tracy Lynn's future—a future her mother, Chelsa, would never see, the fairy-tale wedding she would never attend. They'd even chosen names for the grandbabies, whose sweet, warm bodies her mother would never rock in her arms.

Those had been the very best weeks of Tracy Lynn's life. And the very worst.

Ten years had gone by since her mom had died. Tracy Lynn had truly believed she'd be married long before she turned twenty-five—a reasonable assumption since she'd *never* lacked for dates.

But Prince Charming hadn't arrived.

So she'd decided to go on without him.

Granted, she hadn't actually met the deadline she'd so confidently promised her mother, but she was darn close. Next month, on Christmas Eve, she'd be turning thirty.

Before that auspicious day, though, she would be able to tell her dad that he was going to be a grandpa. The thought of Hope Valley Mayor Jerald Randolph bouncing his grandbaby on his knee was enough to make Tracy Lynn laugh out loud.

She looked up as her dad pushed through the glass doors of the courthouse. He was a handsome man at fifty-nine, his dark hair graying at the temples, giving him a distinguished look. He was also still quite slim, due in part to his restless energy.

Jerald Randolph didn't know how to relax; he had to be going somewhere or doing something all the time.

She waved and jogged up the half-dozen steps to meet him on the wide landing and give him a hug. "Hey, Daddy."

His frown was both apologetic and confused as he pecked her on the cheek. "Did I forget an appointment, honey?"

"No. But I have some great news, and I couldn't wait to share it."

"Can you tell me in three minutes or less? You caught me on the way to a meeting."

"I know. I called Alice and she itemized your schedule." His secretary knew more about him than anyone else. Tracy Lynn had hoped to get her father alone so they could celebrate in private, but the man was a workaholic—had been all her life—and she'd learned to catch him when she could, often obliged to fall into step beside him as he rushed from one place to the next, conducting his mayoral duties or handling his commercial real estate investment business.

"That's why I wanted to intercept you this afternoon, so you'd be the first to know. It's all I can do not to climb the flagpole and shout it to the world."

He gave her an indulgent smile. "In the interest of decorum, why don't you just tell me and I'll pass along whatever it is at the school-board meeting. That'd be a lot more effective. Those folks can spread news faster than a minnow can swim a dipper."

Although he was smiling at her, she noticed that he looked pale, tired. But her fabulous announcement would perk him up for sure.

She took a breath, felt her eyes mist from happiness.

"You're going to be a grandfather, Dad."

He looked at her in confusion.

“I’m pregnant.”

Dead silence met her words. Instead of the awe and exuberant hug she’d expected, his smile faded and his facial muscles went rigid.

A sparrow hopped off a nearby brick planter, then darted away in a flutter of wings. Somewhere, a woodpecker hammered his beak into bark in search of supper, the staccato sound matching the rhythm of Tracy Lynn’s heart.

Dread began to gather beneath her sternum as she waited for him to respond. Although they were the only two standing on the steps, he glanced around as if checking to see if anyone might have overheard her announcement.

This wasn’t the proud reception she’d expected. He appeared...embarrassed.

“Daddy?” she prompted. “Aren’t you excited?”

Gripping her upper arm, he pulled her to one side of the landing, next to the iron bench and metal ash can county employees used during smoke breaks.

“What do you mean, you’re pregnant?” The question was a harsh demand. His gaze darted to her stomach, then back to her face. “Did you think this was good news? You’re not even married, Tracy Lynn.”

“Oh, Daddy.” She smiled and shook her head. “That’s not an issue in this generation.”

“You damned well better believe it is in my generation! It’s vitally important for our family to keep up a good image. If I run for senator, you can be sure my opponent will dig deep in our backyard, searching for old bones we can’t bury. My God, girl, you know how gossip is in a small town.”

“But this is *good* gossip. There’s no need to hide my pregnancy or the existence of my child.” The sting of rejection swarmed in her stomach like angry bees. She was both bewildered and terrified.

For the first time in her life, she wasn’t Daddy’s perfect girl. And she didn’t know quite how to react.

Jerald reached for his handkerchief and mopped his brow. “Who’s the father?”

“No one...” The gray pallor of his skin worried her, cutting off her explanation. He was breathing heavily, and she’d never seen him sweat so profusely. “Daddy? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I asked you a question, girl. I—” He opened his mouth to continue, but his face contorted in pain. To her everlasting horror, he clutched his chest, and before her brain could

signal her to reach out and catch him, he collapsed at her feet, his back scraping against the iron bench as he went down.

“Oh, my God! Daddy! Somebody, help!” She wasn’t sure if she managed to yell loud enough for anyone inside the courthouse to hear. Her purse slid off her shoulder as she dropped to her knees beside him.

She couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. She felt as though she was having a nightmare—this couldn’t be happening! Every bit of first-aid training she’d ever learned—she’d needed it to care for her mother and later to work at the senior center—flew right out of her head.

“Don’t do this to me, girl.” He wheezed and gasped for breath. “I can’t have my daughter pregnant and not married. Tell me. We’ll make everything right. I need to know who fathered this baby—”

“I did, sir.”

Tracy Lynn turned quickly to see who had spoken. Lincoln Slade—bad-boy-turned-rancher. She watched, heart in her throat, as Linc bent down, loosened Jerald’s shirt buttons, looked him straight in the eye and said, “Now, let’s calm down and leave this discussion until later.”

Tracy Lynn was so distraught she could hardly think past the fact that her strong, youthful father was lying at the top of the courthouse steps gasping for breath. In some rational part of her mind, she noted that Linc already had his cell phone against his ear.

Oh, God. Hers was in her purse. She hadn’t even thought—

“I need rescue in front of the courthouse,” Linc said into the phone. “Patient’s name is Jerald Randolph. Early sixties. Appears to be a heart attack. Tell the paramedics that if they look out their door, they’ll see us.”

She glanced down the street. It felt as though the fire station was ten miles away instead of a mere block.

“Do you have any aspirin, babe?”

“I have Tylenol.” She snatched up her purse, dumping the contents on the cement. “Will that work? Wait. Maybe I’ve got—“

Linc swore.

Her head jerked up, fear ripping at her insides.

Her father’s eyes had rolled back in his head.

His chest wasn't moving.

Linc dropped the phone and went into action.

Paralyzed by shock, Tracy Lynn stared as he checked her father's pulse, his breathing, then shook him and shouted his name. Only seconds passed before he tilted back her daddy's head, breathed deeply into his mouth, then began CPR compressions.

"Breathe for him, Trace," Linc said. "I'll pause on ten. Come on, now. Get it together."

Her hands were shaking so hard she could barely position her father's chin.

"And nine, and ten," Linc counted. "Now!"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she tried to blow air into her father's mouth, but terror and anguish made her own breath shallow. She choked on a sob, didn't even have enough air in her lungs to lift his chest.

"Damn it, Tracy Lynn. Snap out of it!" Linc resumed chest compressions, palms cupped, counting even as he shouted at her. "This isn't about you. Princess. Now breathe for him or kiss him goodbye!"

Tears dripping onto her father's face, she did as she was told, Linc's forceful words finally penetrating her stupor. Between Linc's compressions, she transferred her breath into her father's lungs for what seemed like hours.

At last sirens screamed from half a block away. Tracy Lynn wondered why in heaven's name the paramedics hadn't just grabbed their gear and run the short distance.

As she bent to cover his mouth once more, Jerald took a breath. His eyes opened and he looked around wildly as though he had no idea how he'd ended up lying on the cold concrete.

Paramedics appeared at her elbow. One of them was Damian Stoltz. She'd dated him a couple of years ago, but things hadn't worked out between them.

She felt Linc's hands on her, urging her to her feet, shifting her out of the way so the medics would have room to work. Her body trembled and her teeth chattered, more from fear than the chilly afternoon air.

"You did just fine, babe," Linc said, drawing her against his side, his hands chafing her arms, her back, bringing warmth to thaw the icy shock.

She shook her head, didn't deserve his bolstering. She'd been worse than useless, frozen in blind terror when she should have acted. "He wasn't breathing. His heart stopped. Linc, what if—"

“Shh. He’s in good hands now.”

The other paramedic was Mason Lowe, who she’d also dated. Thank heaven she remained friends with guys when the relationships didn’t work. She’d never seen Damian or Mason so serious and efficient.

Or Linc, either.

She leaned into his warmth. He’d only been back in Hope Valley for four months, showing up the day his brother, Jackson Slade, had married Sunny Carmichael—who happened to be the town’s veterinarian and one of Tracy Lynn’s best friends.

“I’m so glad you were here,” she said.

He didn’t respond. Lincoln Slade was one of those men who could be stingy with words.

Just when she thought her nerves were about to get a reprieve, there was a scurry of activity and a volley of words between Damian and Mason.

“V-fib,” Damian said. “Charging to two hundred joules.”

Daddy! Tracy Lynn automatically lunged forward, but Linc hooked his arm around her waist and held her back.

“What’s wrong? What are they doing?” She could hear the fear in her voice as she struggled against Linc’s hold. “Let me go. I need to see what’s happening.”

“Shh.” He pressed his mouth to her hair near her ear. “Let the professionals do their work, babe.”

Her fingernails dug into the sleeve of his brown suede jacket, his arm remaining as taut as a safety harness around her middle. One of the monitors on the ground emitted an escalating whine. A discarded wrapper, ripped open in haste, skipped away with the wind, tumbling across the courthouse lawn.

“Everybody stay back,” Mason said, quickly checking to ensure their compliance. “I’m clear,” he said. “You’re clear. Everybody’s clear. Shocking at two hundred joules.”

Tracy Lynn realized what was going on a bare instant before the defibrillator paddles sent an audible jolt through her father’s body, a jolt that lifted his upper body right off the ground.

“Nothing!” Mason reported. “Charging again to three hundred.”

She couldn’t watch. Twisting in Linc’s arms, she rested her forehead against his chest and gripped the lapels of his sheepskin-lined suede jacket, horribly aware of her own moan as the second shock, then a third reverberated behind her.

Linc's hand cupped the back of her head, applying firm and steady pressure, his other hand stroking the length of her back over her cashmere sweater. His hold was both comforting and protective, shielding her whether she wanted him to or not.

If she'd been capable of speech, she would have told him that there was no danger of her stealing a look.

She couldn't bear to watch another parent die before her eyes.

"They've got him back," he whispered against her hair, loosening his hold.

Her fingers relaxed their grip on the lapels of his jacket. She filled her lungs with the chill air and stepped back. "Thanks for the shoulder—or the chest, rather." She smiled weakly.

"Anytime."

"We'll transport your father to Mercy General," Damian said as Mason finished inserting the IV he'd had to abandon moments ago.

Hope Valley was a small blip on the map west of Austin. Although they had a fully staffed medical clinic here in town, Mercy General, which was a little farther away, was better equipped to handle a cardiac patient.

"May I ride with him?" She was dry-eyed now. Her body and mind were simply too numb for tears.

"Of course," Mason answered, his eyes kind as he stood. "We've got room."

As they strapped Jerald onto a gurney, she thought briefly about the subject that had apparently brought on Daddy's heart attack. It was clear he wanted the news of her baby kept under wraps. He ought to consider a future behind a pulpit, rather than a seat in the senate. He was darn good at making an innocent person feel like a sinner.

Nausea welled as she watched the medics wheel him to the ambulance. She took several deep breaths against the memories pelting her, the memories of all the times she'd ridden in the back of medical vehicles with her mother when the cancer had gotten bad.

Daddy had never been with them, she realized now. She'd always had to call him at work and let him know to meet them at the hospital. Odd that she'd never thought of this before, how little he'd been around during those final days. In the end, Tracy Lynn's arms were the ones holding her mother, easing her passage into death.

Linc squeezed her shoulder. "I'll follow you in my truck."

For a moment, she'd forgotten he was there, which was pretty amazing. Lincoln Slade wasn't the kind of man a person easily forgot. His six-foot-four frame alone commanded attention.

"You don't have to drive all the way out to Mercy," she said,

He smoothed his hand along her hair. "You'll need a ride home, babe."

"I can get a cab."

"That'd be silly since I'm offering." He urged her toward the ambulance. "I'll meet you there."

* * *

Linc watched her climb into the back of the ambulance. A few employees from the courthouse had gathered outside the glass doors, keeping a respectful distance. Linc barely glanced in their direction.

He went down the courthouse steps and climbed into his truck, then fell in behind the ambulance as it traveled down Main Street and turned onto the two-lane highway heading east toward Austin. His mind kept flipping back to the astonishing fact that Tracy Lynn was pregnant.

Man alive, he hadn't expected that. And he hadn't been prepared for the jealousy he was feeling now, jealousy regarding the real father of her child.

Despite his quick actions, his nerves weren't all that steady. He'd never imagined he'd find himself in the position of saving Jerald Randolph's life, and he didn't mind admitting that the whole episode shook him up.

Now that he mentally replayed the scene, he felt bad about hollering at Tracy Lynn. Man, the anguish in those blue eyes had nearly flayed him alive.

He'd always been a little in love with her, but any fool knew that the socialite and the son of the town drunk weren't a good combination. Her daddy had made that quite clear when Linc had walked her home from school one day years ago after a group of bullies had cornered her and scared the bejeebers out of her.

A lot had changed since then, though. Anger, dogged determination and a knack with horses made him one of the top Thoroughbred breeders in the state of Texas. Hell, he could buy this town—including Jerald Randolph—and still have money in the bank.

Not that he still bore Randolph a grudge. Truthfully, he didn't give a damn about anyone's opinion of him. Most of his life he'd been labeled a bad boy, the kid from the wrong side of the tracks, and sometimes he deliberately made it a point to maintain that reputation.

It remained to be seen if the good mayor still judged a man by where he came from, or if he recognized and appreciated the changes a man could make in his life. When they'd worked side by side updating Donetta Presley-Carmichael's hair salon a few weeks back, Jerald hadn't reacted to him one way or the other.

But the man had sure blown a gasket today.

Blue-and-red flashing lights chased across the bar on top of the paramedic van, the vivid strobes clearly visible even in the bright afternoon sun. He could see Tracy Lynn's blond hair through the back windows.

Hearts would be breaking all over town when news got out that Tracy Lynn Randolph was pregnant.

Like her father, Linc wanted to know who the daddy was. There had to be a story, otherwise she'd have come clean right away when Jerald asked her for a name.

He sure hadn't anticipated being trapped into eavesdropping on Tracy Lynn's conversation with her father when he'd pushed through the courthouse door and stepped outside. They'd been off to the side of the door by the wrought-iron bench, but they might as well have been square in the middle of his path.

His gut had twisted when he'd realized Jerald was berating her right there in public. Never mind that he'd been the only one around to witness it.

All he'd been able to think about were the memories of his own father shouting, swinging his arm with an open palm aimed at his head. Or a bullwhip lashing the tender skin on his back.

The best decision Linc had made back then was to hightail his backside out of Hope Valley at the first opportunity—which happened to fall at the wise old age of seventeen. Ever since, he couldn't abide bullies or seeing anyone being taken advantage of.

He was a champion for the underdog, and in that one moment this afternoon, Tracy Lynn had appeared in need of rescue.

Then Jerald had collapsed, and Linc's only thought had been to get the situation under control. Telling the mayor that he'd gotten his daughter pregnant was a little extreme, but it had been a snap decision, the only way he'd seen at the time to bring about some calm.

No big deal, he told himself. They'd just explain later when Jerald wasn't in danger of having another heart attack.

As he followed the paramedics into the emergency parking lot entrance to the hospital, he picked up his cell phone. Tracy Lynn would want her friends to know what was going on.

The Texas Sweethearts, they called themselves.

The four women—Sunny Carmichael-Slade, Donetta Presley-Carmichael, Becca Sue Ellsworth and Tracy Lynn Randolph had all grown up together and were still a tight group, even though two had married—Sunny to his brother and Donetta to Sunny's brother, Sheriff Storm Carmichael. Linc didn't understand that kind of closeness, the genuine love and trust the four women felt for one another.

He mostly kept to himself. The solitary lifestyle worked for him, and he liked it just fine.

And he sure as hell wouldn't trust anyone with his heart.