

★ TEXAS GOLD COLLECTION ★

A WOMAN OF
FORTUNE

— A —
TEXAS GOLD
NOVEL

KELLIE COATES GILBERT



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kellie Coates Gilbert, *A Woman of Fortune*
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To my sister,
Jeannie Ann Cunningham,
a woman of extraordinary grace

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Prologue

Until today, Claire Massey had never been inside the walls of a federal prison.

She'd taken French cooking lessons in Paris, photographed the aurora borealis, and even dined with a president and his wife. But never in her wildest imagination could she have contemplated herself doing this.

She fingered the fine-grain leather bag in her lap as the car slowly moved through heavy metal gates and past the guard tower that strangely resembled a childhood fort.

“You okay, Mom?”

She startled at her son's voice. “What? Uh, yes, I'm fine.” Her hand plunged inside her purse for her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses.

Max took a deep breath. “You don't have to do this, you know.”

Claire nodded, keeping her eyes averted from the razor wire that cut a line across the horizon. She slipped the glasses on, glad for the barrier between her budding tears and the harsh Texas sun reflecting off the building looming ahead.

She swallowed. Hard. This was no time to lose it.

After pulling one hand from the steering wheel, her son slipped

his palm over her trembling fingers. “Please, Mom, let me go in with you.”

She shook her head. “No, this is something I need to do. Alone.”

Max circled the parking lot twice before finding an empty spot. He pulled the car between a pickup with wheels the size of her car door and a battered green sedan that had definitely seen better days. From its rearview mirror hung a rosary and a pair of red lace panties, the kind you might see on a Victoria’s Secret model.

Her son cut the engine.

Claire took a deep breath. “I don’t know how long this will take.”

Something in Max’s eyes dimmed. He scratched at his beard stubble. “I’ll be here.”

The line at the front door extended several hundred yards. Claire moved with caution into place at the end, behind a heavy woman clothed in a stained housedress and slipper-like shoes that dug deeply into swollen flesh.

She shifted uncomfortably in her own wedge pumps, aware she’d made a questionable shoe choice. Why hadn’t she thought to wear tennis shoes? The woman she’d talked to on the telephone yesterday warned Saturday was their heaviest day for visitors, cautioning the line would be like this.

Forty minutes passed before Claire reached the front-entry door and stepped into the large, old brick building and out of the baking sun, the inside air a welcome respite from the heat emanating from the concrete she’d been standing on. Despite the cooler temperature, sweat formed on her scalp. The heat perhaps? Or maybe nerves. She couldn’t tell.

From somewhere in the line behind her, a young girl shushed her squalling infant. Claire couldn’t help but think this was no place for a baby. But then again, would any of them be here if given a better option?

A woman officer dressed in a blue shirt, damp at the underarms, stepped forward. “I’ll need your driver’s license.” She thrust

a clipboard at Claire. “Sign at the designated spot and put the time next to your name.” She tilted her head toward a large clock on the opposite wall. “And place your belongings in the basket.”

Claire looked up. “My belongings?”

The woman sighed. “Rings, watch. You can’t take nothing in with you.”

“But my purse—”

“Nothing,” she repeated.

Claire swallowed and did as she was told. When finished, she held up the basket to the officer.

The woman pointed to a wall lined with lockers and handed Claire a key. “Over there.”

As soon as she stored her belongings, she glanced around, confused about where to go next. An older black lady with white hair gave her a toothy smile and pointed toward a metal door with a sign posted above that read “Visitors Holding Room.”

Claire gave her a token nod of gratitude and followed a crowd of people moving in that direction. After passing through the metal detector, she was patted down by another female officer, who smelled of cigarettes and maple syrup. “Wait over there,” the woman said, pointing to metal chairs lined up against a pea-green wall in bad need of paint.

She nodded and scanned for an empty chair, then sat to wait.

A man moved past, mopping the floor. His shoes made a slight squeaky sound every time he slugged forward, slowly pulling the dirty-looking mop across the speckled linoleum floor.

Claire looked away, focusing instead on a fake philodendron wedged in the corner, a few feet away from a drinking fountain hanging from the wall. Anything to quiet the voices in her head. Especially Jana Rae’s.

“What are you? Ten shades of stupid?” her friend had asked over the phone.

“Look, this is something I need to do,” Claire explained.

“Claire, listen to me. This crazy idea is going to put you square

on the wrong end of an intervention. You know what I mean? Haven't you been through enough already?"

That was one thing Claire loved about Jana Rae. Few people could truly be counted on in life. Her crazy friend with blazing red hair and a mouth snappy as a bullwhip had always been in her corner of the arena. Even now.

Claire leaned her head back against the cold, hard wall of the holding room, keeping her eyes closed so she wouldn't have to see countless young girls waiting to see their baby daddies. The sight was far too depressing. But then, she wasn't so different. A female who had stood by her man and looked the other way, failing to see things as they really were.

Funny how she'd always known the grass was green—but never needed to know how or why.

She gnawed on her bottom lip, a habit she'd taken up as of late. "Claire Massey?"

The booming voice caused her to startle. Claire glanced about the room as if there might be another woman with that name. "Me?" she asked.

The woman officer with the clipboard heaved a sigh laced with boredom. "Your name Massey?"

She nodded and stood. She followed the officer through the door and down a long hallway with windowless walls the color of the dried mud lining the pond out at Legacy Ranch, the one she'd gazed out at each morning while sitting in the breakfast nook.

The woman led her through a heavy metal door into a room less than half the size of her bathroom at home. Granted, the bathroom had been much larger than most, but this space felt cramped nonetheless.

A barrier cut the room in half, the upper portion made of glass grimy with handprints. The scene was straight out of a television episode of *CSI*.

Claire turned to thank the officer, but she was now alone. Nervous, she slid into the empty chair on her side of the barrier.

And waited.

Claire told herself to breathe. Her heart pounded wildly, and by the time the door on the other side of the barrier creaked open, every nerve fiber in her body was charged. It would take next to nothing to spark tears.

She trained her eyes on the doorway and vowed not to cry. Not here.

Then he entered, appearing older, more tired than the last time she'd seen him. Perhaps resigned to his circumstances. But he still looked at her with the same eyes—the ones she'd gazed into that night all those years ago at the Burger Hut. And so many times since.

Tuck quickly moved to the window and took his seat. With a guard standing nearby, he placed his shackled palm against the glass and mouthed, "I love you."

Claire blinked several times before picking up the telephone receiver and motioning for him to do the same.

He scrambled for the phone at his side, as though it were a line to the life he'd left behind . . . to her. He quickly nestled the black handset against his ear.

"Claire." He said her name with a kind of reverence, a tone you'd use with someone you cherished.

Claire swallowed against the dryness of her throat. She looked into her husband's eyes and steeled herself.

"I want a divorce."

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FOUR MONTHS EARLIER

Claire wrapped the apron ties around her waist and gazed out the window. In the distance, a small army of men assembled large white tents. Catering trucks littered the horizon, and she could see smoke drifting from the barbeque pit, where in a few hours, beef briskets would be slow-roasted until tender, and hundreds of T-bone steaks grilled to smoky perfection.

Like in past years, come dusk, a steady stream of chrome-laden trucks and shiny black limousines would ease through the gate leading to Legacy Ranch, continuing well after uniformed servers marched across the lawns, carrying the first trays of lobster canapés. Snagging an invite to the Masseys' annual barbeque bash was akin to receiving the Hope Diamond in a Christmas stocking. No annual event in all of Texas—not even the Cattle Baron's Ball—was more widely anticipated.

“Where would you like the flowers placed, Mrs. Massey?”

Claire turned to find a guy in a green and white T-shirt holding a clipboard. “Oh . . .” She wiped her hands on her apron. “Let's take them right on out back. Just give me one minute.” She picked up a pâté mold from the counter and turned to her housekeeper. “Margarita, would you place this in the refrigerator for me?”

“Sure.” Margarita stopped chopping, took the mold, and headed for the walk-in cooler.

“Here, this way.” Claire waved for the young man to follow as she walked through the French doors leading to the back portico.

Every year, Tuck shook his head and wondered why his wife involved herself in these types of details. “Isn’t that why we maintain a staff and hire caterers?” he’d patiently remind her.

He was right, of course. Margarita was fully capable of orchestrating all the party preparations, and Claire usually let her. But she didn’t care what her husband and three grown children thought—even a woman of her financial means was entitled to spend time in the kitchen if she chose, no matter how many staff they employed.

Claire stepped into the morning sun and shaded her line of vision with a raised hand. “Was Mr. Larsen able to get the hydrangeas I ordered?” she asked the young man with the clipboard.

“Got the shipment this morning, in all the way from Oregon. Blue and white, just like you specified.” He motioned a delivery truck into place, then jumped up on the landing platform and opened the truck’s back door. He pulled out a sample vase filled with blooms and held them up for her approval.

Pleased, she awarded him with a quick smile. “They’re perfect!” She pointed. “See the pillars on either side of the portico?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s where I’ll want them. There, and on either end of the buffet tables and at each of the bars.” Claire motioned to the manicured lawn, past the pool area, where the tables and equipment were being set up. “The smaller floral arrangements are for the tables where the guests will be seated for dinner.” She reached out and caressed the bursts of periwinkle-blue blossoms.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Massey.”

“You can call me Claire.” She smiled and turned just in time to see her sleepy daughter step through the door, steaming coffee in hand.

“Isn’t everything turning out lovely, sweetie?”

“Sounds like a small war going on out here.” Lainie surveyed the activity and shook her head. “I still don’t understand why you don’t have a catering service do all this, Mother.”

“Because I enjoy it. Your father is going to be so pleased, don’t you think?”

“I think Dad has more important things to think about.”

Claire swallowed the sting of her daughter’s remark. “I just want everything perfect.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Margarita in the kitchen marshaling a spur of activity. “Oh, good. The cake’s here.” Claire brushed past Lainie to where two women were entering through the service door, balancing a large multitiered cake frosted in white and covered in perfectly spaced dots the exact color of the blue hydrangeas. At the top, a replica of the Legacy Ranch logo was centered just so, surrounded by tiny cattle made of marzipan.

Claire clasped her hands. “Oh yes—that’s just what I had in mind.”

“Do you want the cake placed in the cooler, Mrs. Massey?”

“Yes, but let’s plan to set it out at least an hour before we cut it, okay, Margarita? I don’t want everyone biting into ice-cold cake.”

Lainie slugged into the kitchen, flip-flops slapping the tiled floor. “Morning, Margarita.”

“Good morning, Miss Lainie.” The older woman surveyed the girl in the baggy sweats and T-shirt, hair pulled back. “Looks like you stayed out a *leetle* too late last night.” She wiped her hands on her apron and winked. “’Bout time you kicked those heels up a little.”

Lainie threw a loving but impatient look at their housekeeper. “I wasn’t ‘kicking up’ any heels. Reece and I attended a fund-raiser gala for the Dallas Symphony last evening. Reece’s mother is on the board. We joined his parents and the Mannings for dinner afterward.”

Claire looked up. “The Mannings?”

Lainie took a sip of her coffee. “Major contributors to Reece’s campaign.”

“Ah-ye, amiga.” Margarita waved her hand. “You need some fun in your life.” The older woman turned and headed outside. Claire couldn’t have said it better herself.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He had to go to the office for a little while.” Claire walked to the sink to wash her hands. “Would you call your brother later and remind him to be here by five o’clock?”

“What? Do I look like Max’s keeper?” Lainie refilled her coffee.

“Oh, don’t be that way. He’ll probably get here in plenty of time. I just want to be sure.” Claire opened the cupboard and drew out her own mug, walked over, and poured herself some coffee.

“I invited Reece’s parents to stay over in the guest house after the party tonight. I hope that’s okay.” Lainie grabbed a banana from the fruit basket next to the coffeepot and turned to the door.

“You did? Well, sure—of course.” Claire studied her daughter’s back as she blew through the doorway and out of sight.

Great. Just what she needed. It wasn’t that she disliked Andrew and Glory Sandell. It was that Reece’s parents—and especially his mother—always seemed to have ulterior motives. Like her dad used to say, “Those coyote pups may look cute . . . careful, they’re anything but.”

That was how she felt whenever she was in a conversation with Glory Sandell. Lainie’s future mother-in-law appeared charming enough, but Claire worried if she left her hand extended a little too long, Glory might just bite it.



By five o’clock, the party had barely started and the lawns were crowded already. Near the dance floor, Claire spotted a couple of Dallas Cowboys players, the producer of *Good Morning Texas*, and a stunning woman who had been Miss Texas in the mid-nineties,

whose carefully doctored looks could still trump those of some of the much younger women at this party.

Several yards away, a slender brunette wearing five-inch stilettos and a tight silver dress waved. “Great party, Claire.”

Claire raised her glass, barely able to hear over the helicopter landing on the pad behind the barns. “Hey, Sharon,” she called back. She’d met the owner of the wildly popular exercise studio, Milana, in Dallas several years back after Tuck suggested they both might lose a few pounds before their trip to Aruba. Claire had made a weekly trip downtown for Sharon’s popular yoga class, which Tuck teased was populated by women with air-brushed complexions who practiced born-again matrimony—leaving starter marriages behind to worship more lucrative marital prospects.

Speaking of Tuck, where had he taken off to? Claire scanned the crowd for her husband. Failing to spot him, she headed toward her oldest son. Garrett and his wife, Marcy, were talking with Sidney McAlvain, owner of a large gas and oil conglomerate headquartered in Houston. Sidney had his arm around a tall blonde nestled beside him. Rich men seemed to have no trouble finding what Lainie called *arm candy*, even short bald guys with cigar breath.

At one of the parties held in their Dallas Cowboys skybox, Sidney once bragged there was nothing more profitable than black gold. Tuck had laughed. “You’re absolutely right,” he said. “As long as that black gold has horns and eats grass.”

Sidney must have agreed. Tuck later confided his friend had written a check investing nearly twenty million dollars, becoming the proud owner of several herds of Kansas Holsteins. Less than a year later, Tuck maneuvered his friend’s investment into a tidy sum.

That was how Tuck operated. No one knew the cattle market like her husband.

Just last month, the host of one of those cable news networks reported few were more successful than Tuck Massey at turning a profit. After the show aired, the telephone never stopped ringing.

Not that she should complain. After all, she had a charismatic

husband who loved her, and they'd raised three great children. Being Tuck Massey's wife came with a lot of perks.

"Hey there, everybody." Claire leaned forward and accepted a slight kiss on her cheek from her daughter-in-law, who was dressed in a pretty tangerine-colored sundress that offset her auburn hair. "I hope y'all are having a great time."

Sidney puffed heavily on his cigar, sending a cloud of smoke her direction that made her eyes water. Discreetly, she stepped back as the man's manicured fingers flicked ashes on the grass at their feet. "Claire, you and Tuck have done it again. I keep thinking this party can't get any better. Yet somehow you Masseys top the year before."

The blonde shifted her tight dress and let out a nervous giggle. "I can't believe I'm here. I mean, really. I've read about these barbeques for years. I'm so honored to attend."

Claire saw Marcy's gaze drop to the blonde's neckline and the surgically enhanced chest captured within the fabric. In a wise move, Garrett trained his eyes on the woman's face.

Amused, Claire gave Sidney's companion du jour a welcoming smile. "We're so happy you could join us." She extended her hand and paused. "Uh . . ."

Sidney pulled the cigar from his mouth. "Daisy," he said.

His date smiled broadly. "Daisy Anheuser. No relation to the beer family," she quickly added before leaning back into Sidney's arms.

"Where are you from?" Marcy asked, disapproval evident across her features.

"I'm from Ohio. Grew up around Cincinnati. But I live in Dallas now."

Sidney slipped an oyster from a tray being passed by one of the servers. "Where's my favorite cattle meister?" He blew cigar smoke, then slurped the raw oyster and placed the empty shell back on the tray.

Claire winced and placed her hand on Garrett's arm. "I was just wondering the same. Could you please excuse us? I have a missing

husband to find.” She gave Sidney and his date a pinched smile. “Enjoy the evening.”

She hooked her arm inside Garrett’s and they walked with Marcy past the pool. Claire’s eyes scanned the crowd. Seeing no sign of Tuck, she voiced a not-so-subtle complaint. “Doesn’t your father know we’re hosting a barbeque? Where could he be?”

“I think I saw him head toward the office with his banker.” Garrett slipped his hand onto Marcy’s back. “But that was over half an hour ago, right, honey?”

Claire stopped walking. She jutted her chin. “During our party?”

A server stepped forward. “Caviar, Mrs. Massey?”

She directed her attention to the black beluga roe on the silver platter. Using the tiny pearl-handled spoon, she scooped a small mound onto a toast point and slipped the rare and very expensive delicacy into her mouth.

With a frown, Claire waved over one of the catering managers. “The caviar is several degrees too warm.” She placed her hand on his forearm. “I’m afraid the outside temperature is working against us.”

“Yes, Mrs. Massey. I’ll certainly take care of that right away. My apologies.” The man in the black tuxedo snapped his fingers at another waiter, then spoke into a lapel microphone. Seconds later, two men scurried from the direction of the house, carrying trays of shaved ice.

“Look, go check on your father, would you, Garrett? And if he’s out there, tell him I send a message. This is no time for business. Not during the party.”

Claire watched Garrett and Marcy continue on, maneuvering through pockets of guests. As they faded from sight, she packed up her angst and headed in the direction of the house.

“It’s a shame Baker had to pull out of the race. Fighting cancer doesn’t work very well on the campaign trail. But Reece Sandell will make a fine senator . . .” Governor Jackson let his words fade as Claire approached.

“Claire, dear—what a lovely party.” The governor’s wife clasped her hand.

“Thank you, Mrs. Jackson.” Claire brushed the woman’s cheek with a kiss before greeting her white-haired husband. “Governor.”

Suddenly, Tuck was at her side. He patted Governor Jackson’s shoulder. “Glad you could make it, John.”

“Hey, there you are.” The governor’s eyes lit up. He extended a blue-veined hand and gave his host an enthusiastic handshake.

A huge grin on his face, Tuck waved over one of the servers with a wide swipe of his hand. “Now, you two, listen up. I don’t want either one of you to be shy when it comes to dishing up for dinner.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “In addition to the T-bones, we had several cases of the filets you raved about last year prepared special. And,” he added, “there’s a case for you to take home.”

Mrs. Jackson eyed the barbeque pit appreciatively and rewarded her host with a smile before sliding a tall glass of sweet tea from the tray offered by a white-gloved server, who then turned to the governor. “Sir? Would you care for something to drink?”

Last election cycle, television pundits claimed John Jackson was past his prime, causing him to slip in the polls at a dangerous rate. Tuck stood up at the Cattle Baron’s Ball and endorsed John as a friend to Texas ranching, garnering the wavering candidate enough support to win the election, just barely. The act placed Tuck on a pedestal in the governor’s eyes, which should bolster Reece’s run for election. “It’s all about relationships,” Tuck often reminded his boys.

Claire took in the scent of her husband’s cologne as he leaned in and kissed her. “So, where’ve *you* been, mister?” Her voice teased, but she hoped her eyes sent a more serious message.

“Schmoozing.” Tuck winked at the governor and his wife. “If you two will pardon us, Claire and I must greet a few hundred guests.”

Out of earshot from the governor and his wife, Tuck apologized. “Sorry, babe. I didn’t mean to get tied up. You know nothing could keep me from our party for long.”

She squeezed his hand. “Yeah. Uh-huh. You’ve been spending way too much time out in the offices lately. Today is for you to relax and enjoy yourself.”

As they neared the pit, the air filled with an intoxicating aroma of beef cooking over mesquite. Tuck patted one of the cooks on the shoulder. “Hey there, Charlie. Those steaks are looking mighty good.”

“Thank you, Mr. Massey. We’ll be ready to serve up the first round of this’n here beef in about ten minutes.”

“Mmm, can’t wait.” Tuck gave the old pit master a smile of approval.

Claire felt a tap on her shoulder. “Mother, may I speak to you a moment?” There was an unusual urgency in her daughter’s voice. Claire offered up an apology and followed Lainie.

Once they were a safe distance from being overheard, Lainie explained. “It’s Max.” She nodded over at the table where her younger brother sat, arm draped sloppily over the blonde seated to his right, who was looking a bit annoyed.

“Oh, goodness.” Claire waved for Lainie to follow, but before they could make their way to Max, Glory Sandell wedged herself in between the two women and their destination, blocking the line of sight to where Max was more than enjoying the party.

“Claire, you’re fixin’ to put us all to shame. This party is”—she hesitated—“uh, quite the show.”

“Thank you, Glory.” Claire graced the woman with one of her most brilliant smiles, then looped her arm with Glory’s and strolled a few steps, maneuvering away from the blasts of laughter coming from Max’s table.

“Glory, I wanted to tell you about the new cake decorator I’ve discovered. He’s wonderful.” Glory tried to glance over her shoulder, but Claire pressed on. “You might consider him for Reece’s upcoming fund-raiser. In fact, Lainie, why don’t you take Glory and show your future mother-in-law the cake?”

Lainie picked up on the opportunity. “Oh yes. You *have* to see this gorgeous creation before they cut it.”

Claire took a few more steps with them, pointing out that the smart little bakery was located in the Market District, right next to the café they'd lunched at last month, the one that served the to-die-for risotto with chanterelle mushrooms.

With Glory Sandell safely commandeered, Claire scurried to Max's table, which thankfully was now vacant except for her son and the girl.

"Max?"

"Hi, Mom." He grinned up at her. "Mom, this is Bridget. She's the new love of my life." He snorted out a giggle. "I'm gonna marry her."

"Hi, Mrs. Massey."

"Bridget." Claire gave the young woman an apologetic smile before extricating her son's arm from the girl's accommodating shoulder.

"Do you need any help, Mrs. Massey?" Bridget asked.

Claire saw Margarita heading their way. "No, I think we're good."

Minutes later, with Margarita's help, Claire successfully wrangled Max away from the crowd mostly unnoticed, then across the side yard and into the door leading to the east wing of the house.

"Max, for goodness' sake. What if your father had seen you like this? Or worse, one of those reporters?"

"What do you think would happen, Mom?" Her son hiccuped. "Oh, *that's* right. I might be the black sheep of the family. Baaa . . ."

Claire tightened her grip. "Max, that's enough."

"Get it, Mom? Black sheep. Like you said were on Grandpa's farm—in the old days?"

"I can get him from here, Mrs. Massey." The stout housekeeper slapped at Max's hand as he attempted to pinch her cheek. "Enough of you, young man."

"Margarita, would *you* marry me?" he teased, his words slurring.

"I'm gonna marry that hind end in a minute. You're not so grown I can't still bend you over." Margarita placed her more than ample

arms around his shoulders and guided him past the leather sofa and down the hallway to the first-floor guest quarters.

Claire followed close behind. “Thank you, Margarita. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“No problem. Now get back out there. They’ll be cutting the cake soon. Oh, and . . .”

“Yes?”

“Miss Lainie is nearly beside herself.”

Claire nodded and assured her housekeeper she would report back to her anxious daughter as soon as possible that all was well. She gave Margarita a quick pat on the shoulder and headed back to the party.

What was Max thinking? Her son had never used this kind of indiscretion. She only hoped Tuck hadn’t seen. Things were tense enough between the two of them as it was.

Tuck adored his son. But unlike Garrett, who rarely stepped outside his father’s expectations, Max never measured up. As his teen years melted into young adulthood, he’d simply quit trying, instead finding his own path.

Max was a writer. A gifted one—despite the fact he was currently on his third unpublished manuscript since he’d dropped out of college over a year ago. He traded free room and board at home for a two-room loft above the offices of the *Longhorn Weekly*, a small alternative newspaper where he earned rent and a meager paycheck and authored a regularly featured editorial column on the dearth of contemporary politics in America—his destiny, she supposed, given he’d interrupted dinner one evening many years ago with the question, “Daddy, are we *democraps* or *republicans*?”

While she and Tuck had concealed their laughter, Lainie had daintily placed her fork down, given her little brother a stern look, and responded, “We’re *Texans*, silly.”

Claire smiled at the memory, then slowed her pace as Tuck’s voice drifted from the door of the study. He sounded angry.

“Tuck?” she said from the doorway.

Tuck glanced in her direction. “Look, I gotta go. I’ll call you on Monday. Yes, uh-huh. We’ll discuss all this then.” He ended the call and slid his phone in his jeans pocket. “Hi, honey.”

“Tuck, who was that?”

“One of our buyers from Amarillo. Nothing to worry about. Just business.”

Claire studied her husband’s face. He looked like an armadillo hit by a cattle truck. “You sure?”

“Oh, you know these guys,” Tuck said a little too quickly. “Always complaining they don’t make enough money.” He slipped his arm around her waist and led her out into the hallway. “As if millions weren’t enough.” He forced a smile.

Outside, they made their way to their designated places at the head table, where Claire discreetly turned her attention to Jana Rae, who was seated at her right. “I’ll tell you, there are times when managing this family is a full-time job.”

Jana Rae nodded. “I don’t think too many people noticed Max. Everybody’s attention has been on pretty boy.”

Claire followed her gaze to a table nearby, where Reece Sandell pulled out a chair for Lainie. A photographer clicked several shots of the couple. Claire nudged her friend’s arm and responded in a low voice. “Shh, somebody will hear you.”

“Well, it’s true,” Jana Rae whispered. “I mean, look at that guy. No doubt he’s cut from a politician’s bolt of cloth.” She took the linen napkin and placed it in her lap. “If his teeth got any whiter, Lainie would have to wear sunglasses.”

Claire whispered back, “You’re only getting away with those remarks because you’re my best friend. Besides, I’ve never seen Lainie happier.”

After the last of the meal was cleared, the crowd made their way to the dance pavilion. Claire followed Tuck to the stage, where he cleared his throat and leaned into the microphone. “Excuse me, everyone. Can I have your attention?”

Their guests quieted.

“I’d like to thank y’all for coming out for the Legacy Ranch annual barbeque.” Over a ripple of applause, Tuck slipped his arm around Claire’s waist. “Once in a while, a fella gets luckier than he deserves.”

“That’s called *grace*,” Pastor Richards shouted from near the front of the crowd. Several people laughed, including one of Tuck’s fellow elders at Abundant Hills Church, where Claire had chaired the annual missions gala for the last couple of years.

Tuck nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. Can’t believe the big guy upstairs trusted a guy like me with such a pretty thing.” He gave Claire a squeeze. “Seriously, though, I want to tell y’all how much my family means to me. As some of you know, my oldest son Garrett recently took over the ranch operations here. And with any luck, he and that pretty wife of his, Marcy, will be making me and Claire some grandbabies soon.”

Laughter broke out again.

“My son Max, on the other hand—he tossed my advice aside and joined the media. A fine profession, I suppose.” Tuck cleared his throat in an exaggerated manner and pointed to the business reporter from the *Dallas Morning News*.

The reporter smiled and waved.

Tuck cleared his throat a second time, his eyes filling with emotion. “And now my baby girl is getting married. And to the future senator from Texas, no less.”

A roar of applause erupted. Near the front of the crowd, Reece pulled their daughter tight against him.

“Lainie, sweetheart, may you always love one another as much as I love your mother.” Tuck squeezed Claire before lifting his glass. “After nearly thirty years of marriage, my heart still skips a beat every time I look at this gal.”

Claire leaned into the microphone. “And after thirty years of marriage, I can’t believe that tired old line of his still works.”

The crowd responded with laughter. Tuck took Claire’s hand and led her from the stage. She cupped her left palm around Tuck’s

shoulder and placed her other hand in his. Together they held everyone's attention while they two-stepped around the dance floor as Lady Antebellum played their popular tune "I Run to You."

After the last note played, Tuck escorted Claire to where Garrett and Marcy stood applauding. Her husband grinned. "That's how it's done, Son."

Tuck lifted Claire's hand and lightly kissed her palm. The intimate gesture made her feel warm all over, or perhaps it was the balmy Texas evening—she wasn't sure.

The warm air carried the scent of blue bonnets mixed with—
Cigar smoke?

Across the dance floor, Sidney McAlvain puffed away, sending plumes of blue-gray smoke into the air. He pinched Daisy on the backside, sending her into a fit of giggles. When she looked up and noticed Claire watching, she gave a little wave.

Despite what she was thinking, Claire smiled and waved back.