



## Hope Burns (A Hope Novel)

By Jaci Burton

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But when Molly is forced to extend her stay, Carter sees this as his second chance to do things right, to start over again with the only woman he’s ever loved. This time, he isn’t going to let Molly run. Together they’re going to confront the past and put it behind them, and hope for a future as bright as the flame that still burns hot between them.

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### Praise for *New York Times* & *USA Today* Bestselling Author Jaci Burton

“Jaci Burton’s books are always sexy, romantic, and charming!”—Jill Shalvis, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Jaci Burton’s stories are full of heat and heart.”—Maya Banks, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Hey, Jaci: Write faster!”—*USA Today*

“A wild ride.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Lora Leigh

“Jaci Burton delivers.”—Cherry Adair, *New York Times* bestselling author

About the Author

**Jaci Burton** is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Hope Novels (*Hope Ignites*, *Hope Flames*) and the Play-by-Play Novels (*Straddling the Line*, *Melting the Ice*, *One Sweet Ride*, *Thrown by a Curve*).

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“A STALWART IN THE ROMANCE GENRE.”

—*USA Today*

Wild Rider Series

Play-by-Play Novels

Hope Novels

Chapter 1

THIS WEDDING WAS going to be a disaster.

Molly Burnett didn’t know what had possessed her to agree to come back to Hope for her sister Emma’s wedding. Love for her sister, of course. But she knew what was at stake. She never came home, hadn’t been home since she’d left when she was eighteen.

That had been twelve years ago. She'd moved around from town to town, state to state, never setting down roots. Permanence just wasn't Molly's thing. And she sure as hell had never once come back to her hometown.

Until now. Even as she drove past the city limits sign her throat had started to close up, her breathing becoming labored. If she hyperventilated, crashed the car, and died a week before Emma's wedding, her sister would never forgive her.

Then again, with all the sputtering and coughing her ancient Ford Taurus was doing, it might just do itself in before she had a chance to crash it into anything.

"Come on, George," she said, smooth-talking the car. "Hang in there." She didn't have a new—or a newer used—car in her budget. Old George, currently fifteen and she hoped heading toward sixteen, was just going to have to suck it up and keep working.

At the next stoplight, George shuddered and belched rather loudly, making the two little kids sitting in the backseat of the car next to her point and laugh. She gave them a smile, then gently pressed the gas. Obviously having cleared his throat, George lumbered on and Molly sighed in grateful relief. Gripping the steering wheel and forcing deep, calming breaths, Molly drove past the First Baptist Church, her favorite donut shop, the florist, and Edith's Hair Salon. So many places still stood, all of them so familiar.

And yet a lot had changed in twelve years. So much progress, so many new businesses had cropped up. New restaurants, the hospital was bigger than she remembered, and they'd widened the highway. When she'd lived here, there'd been only one shop to stop at for gas and sodas along the main road. Now there was one at every corner.

She purposely turned off the main road, determined to avoid the high school. Too many memories she wasn't ready to face yet. She headed toward the main strip of town. There was a new bakery, and on impulse, Molly decided to stop and buy some goodies for the family.

She headed inside, the smell of sugar and baked goods making her smile. This place definitely reminded her of home, though it hadn't been Cups and Cakes last time she was home. Red and Helen Osajec had owned the Hope Bakery for as long as she could remember. Her mom had told her they'd retired several years ago and sold the bakery.

She wondered who owned this place?

She browsed the display case, her stomach rumbling.

"Can I help you?"

She stood, and smiled at the familiar face from back in high school. With light brown hair and brown eyes, she was still as pretty now as she had been in school.

"Megan? Megan Lee?"

Megan frowned as if trying to place Molly's face, then grinned. "Molly Burnett? I can't believe it's you. Are you back in town for Emma's wedding?"

"I am."

"Then welcome home. I'm so glad to see you after all these years."

“Thanks.” She looked around. “And you work here?”

“Actually, I own the shop. I bought it two years ago after the Osajacks’ retired. I worked for them all through high school, and during breaks from college. I wanted to own my own bakery, and the opportunity fell into my lap when they decided to sell. And of course, you don’t want to hear all those details.”

Molly grinned. “No, really, that’s fantastic. Congratulations. Also, it smells wonderful in here. I’m going to have a hard time figuring out what to buy.”

“Thank you. Have you gotten settled in yet?”

“No. I’m just driving into town, and thought I’d stop and buy some goodies on my way.”

“You’ve come to the right place, then. May I make some suggestions?”

“Definitely.”

Megan took out a box, and between the two of them, they filled it with éclairs and cream puffs.

She left the store, having survived her first reunion with an old friend from Hope. She made her way outside, stopping short as she spotted a very fine male ass bent over, inspecting her car.

“Can I help you?”

He straightened, and Molly almost dropped the box of baked goods.

The last person in Hope she wanted to see today—or ever—stared back at her.

Carter Richards, her first and only love, and the main reason she’d left Hope all those years ago.

“Hey, Molly.”

“What are you doing here, Carter?”

“My auto shop is just a few doors down. I was outside and I saw you get out of the car.”

Recovering, she walked over to the driver’s side, placed the box on the hood, then opened the door. “And you thought this would be a good place for a reunion? Really, Carter?”

She hoped he wouldn’t notice her hands shaking as she slid the box onto the passenger seat and climbed in, shutting the door.

He leaned his forearms inside the car. “That’s all you have to say?”

“I think we said all we needed to say to each other twelve years ago.”

She turned the key and winced at George’s attempts to fire on all cylinders. She tried again, and this time, the car fired up. Sort of. It mostly wheezed.

*Dammit. Come on, George. I just need you to start this one time.*

“Let me help you with that.”

She shot him a look. "I don't need help. I can do this."

She tried again. No go.

"Molly."

Carter's voice was soft, laced with tenderness and concern. She wanted him to disappear. She wanted to pretend he didn't exist, just like she'd tried to erase him from her memories. She wanted to be anywhere but here right now.

"Slide out and let me give it a try."

With a resigned sigh, she opened the door and got out. Carter slid in and fiddled with the ignition.

"George is a little touchy."

He turned to face her. "George?"

Crossing her arms, she nodded. "Yes. George."

His lips curved, and her stomach tumbled. God, he was even more good-looking now than he'd been in high school. He had dark hair, and those mesmerizing green eyes. He wore a polo shirt that stretched tight over his well-muscled biceps. Why couldn't he have turned out bald and fat and hideously ugly? Not that it would have made a difference anyway, because he still would have been Carter.

When George's engine finally turned over, tears pricked Molly's eyes.

Carter got out and held the door for her. "There you go."

"Thanks."

He shut the door, then leaned in again. "Molly . . ."

She looked up at him. "Please don't."

He nodded and backed up a step so she could pull out of the parking spot, which she did with a little too much fervor. As she drove away, she stared at him way too long in her rearview mirror.

Forcing her attention on the road ahead, she gripped the steering wheel and willed the pain in her heart to go away.

It was in the past. Carter was in the past, and that's where he was going to stay.

\* \* \*

CARTER WATCHED MOLLY drive away, that old junker she drove belching out smoke and exhaust like it was on its last legs.

He shook his head and leaned against the wall of the bake shop, needing a minute to clear his head before he went back to work.

He'd been thinking about Molly for a while now, knowing she was coming back to Hope. She had to, because she was in Luke and Emma's wedding. He hadn't expected to see her today, though, when he'd

stepped outside to take a break from all the damn paperwork that was his least favorite part of being owner of several body repair shops.

He'd always liked watching the cars go by on his breaks.

When he'd seen an unfamiliar one—an old beat-up Taurus choking out a black trail of exhaust, then wheezing as it came to a stop in front of the bakery—he couldn't help but wonder who'd drive a piece of shit like that. Surely the owner had to realize the poor junker should be shot and put out of its misery.

His heart slammed against his ribs as a gorgeous brunette stepped out of the car. She had on jeans, a white T-shirt, and sandals as she hurried into the bakery like she didn't want to be recognized. She even kept her sunglasses on, but there was no mistaking who it was. Not to him, anyway.

He could never forget the curve of her face, the fullness of her lips, or her long legs. It might have been twelve years, and she might have changed from girl to woman, but Molly Burnett was someone Carter would never forget. His pulse had been racing, and he knew damn well he should turn around and go back to his office. But for some reason his body hadn't been paying the slightest attention to what his mind told it, and he pushed off the wall and started down the street toward the bakery.

He debated going inside, then thought better of it and decided to figure out what the hell it was she was driving. So he'd walked over and studied the car.

A '99 Taurus. Christ. He wondered where Molly was living, and how the hell that car had made the trip. It had dents all over, patchy rust spots, the muffler was nearly shot, and the tires badly needed replacement—like a year ago.

In retrospect, he should have let Molly be, should have kept his distance from her. But when he'd seen her, he'd closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, transported back to the last time he'd heard her voice. It had been in hurt and anger. The last words they'd said to each other hadn't been kind ones.

And maybe he wanted to change all that.

But it hadn't gone at all like he'd expected. She was still hurt, still angry with him, even after all these years.

Carter dragged his fingers through his hair and made his way down the street toward the garage, then back to his office. He shut the door and stared at his laptop, but all he could see was Molly's long dark hair pulled up in a high ponytail, and her full lips painted some shimmering pink color. She was tan, and her body had changed over the years. She was curvier now, had more of a woman's figure.

But she was still the drop-dead gorgeous woman he'd fallen in love with all those years ago.

He'd thought he was over her, that what he'd once felt for her in high school was long gone. But they'd had a deeper connection than just being first loves.

And seeing her again had hurt a lot more than he'd thought it would.

## Chapter 2

IT HAD TAKEN several miles to stop shaking and get her nerves under control again, but Molly was fine now.

Just. Fine.

Carter wasn't even in her thoughts anymore.

Much.

She finally came to a stop at her grandmother's old house, the house Emma now owned and shared with her fiancé, Luke McCormack.

She pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine, staring at the one-story brick and frame house.

A lot of sweet memories were built into this home. She and Emma playing in the front yard while Grandpa mowed the grass. Her grandmother letting her help bake a pie. Molly had learned some of her not awesome but adequate baking skills from her. No one was as good a cook as her grandmother.

She missed her grandparents, but was glad Emma had decided to live here, instead of letting the house go to strangers.

At least one of the Burnett sisters was comfortable calling Hope home. Molly would never feel at home in Hope again. Too many bad memories.

She got out of the car and headed to the door, smiling at the sound of the old familiar doorbell.

She heard barking, and Emma's voice.

The front door opened and two rather large dogs came running out, one an exuberant pit bull. She knew Annie was still young, but she was huge and nearly knocked her over. Daisy, the lab, was just as excited to see her, though she was a little more reserved.

"Hi, kids." Molly bent down and was rewarded with wagging tails and licks to her face.

"Oh, you're here." Emma came out, looking gorgeous as always, her brown hair in a ponytail. She still wore her scrubs from work as owner of the veterinary clinic in town.

Molly stood as Emma pulled her into a tight hug. "It's been too long, Molls."

Molly closed her eyes, loving the feel of her big sister's strong arms holding her. "It has. I've really missed you."

Emma pulled back, the dogs winding around both their legs. "Come on, girls, give us some space."

Molly laughed. "They're both so adorable."

"Aren't they?" Emma picked at the top of her scrubs. "And I'm so sorry. I probably smell like medicine and animals. I had a late emergency at the clinic, so I just got home about ten minutes ago. I was afraid you were going to get here before me. Oh, and Luke's at Taco Bueno, your favorite, picking up dinner."

Molly grinned, her stomach rumbling at the thought. "You remembered."

"Of course." Emma slung an arm around Molly's shoulders. "Let's go inside."

The dogs followed. Emma shut the door. "I'm going to dash and take a quick shower. Why don't you bring



your bags inside?”

“I can stay at Mom and Dad’s, you know. I’m sure you and Luke want to be alone.”

Emma was headed toward the hall. “Luke and I have a lifetime of being alone. You’ll only be here a short while, so I want to see you as much as I can. Besides, you’re my maid of honor, and we have so much to catch up on with the wedding plans.”

“This is true.”

“Plus, Luke and I have a long vacation in Hawaii coming up after the wedding. So we’ll have blissful alone time.”

“Yeah, how did you manage to swing that, being the sole owner of the vet clinic?”

“One of the docs I know who works at a clinic in Tulsa is going to cover for me. He’s a great guy who’s been out of school two years and works with a large group. He’s looking to buy his own practice, so he wants the solo experience.”

“That’ll work out well for both of you.”

“I know, right? I’ll be back in no time. Make yourself at home. There’s iced tea in the fridge.”

Emma disappeared, and Molly exhaled. She loved her sister, loved seeing her. Usually it was Emma who came to visit her, at least once a year, and they talked on the phone quite a bit, although definitely a lot more recently as they planned the wedding together. Molly felt like a horrible sister for not coming home sooner to help with the ceremony and the other celebrations surrounding it, especially being the maid of honor. She’d told Emma she wouldn’t mind if she wanted one of her friends to handle that responsibility, but Emma had insisted, and fortunately Molly was good at organizing, even long-distance.

But she did have to come home for the wedding. That part she couldn’t handle from afar.

So now here she was—back in Hope, after all these years. Despite her best efforts to stay away forever, she knew someday she’d have to return, so she’d just have to suck it up and deal with it.

Deal with *him*. And all the bitter, painful memories.

Shoving unwanted thoughts of the past aside, she grabbed her bags—plus the box of baked goods—and brought them inside. She put the box on the counter and laid the bags near the door to the hall, then went into the kitchen, found the cupboard where the glasses were located, and pulled the iced tea from the fridge, pouring herself a glass to drink while she waited for Emma. In the meantime, she wandered and took a look around the house.

It had been a long time since she’d been here, but all the details of the place were etched into her memories. The yellow wallpaper in the kitchen had been replaced by bright new paint, and the old linoleum with new tile. The countertop was new as well, as were the cabinets. But the wood floors in the living room were the same. They’d been refinished and restained, and they looked good. The dark wood pillars holding up the archway leading into the hall were still standing as well.

Emma had brightened and renewed their grandparents’ home, but still managed to retain the old charm. Leave it to her sister to manage to retain the memories while bringing the home into the twenty-first century.

The front door opened, and Emma's fiancé, Luke, stepped in. He gave her a wide smile. "Molls. You made it."

"I did." She'd met Luke last year when Emma brought him to Little Rock. Molly had instantly fallen in love with his quiet strength and infinite charm. Emma and Luke were perfectly suited to each other, and it was clear how much he loved her sister. "I hear you were sent on a taco mission."

Luke passed her, giving her a peck on the cheek as he made his way into the kitchen. "I was. Taco Bueno has become one of our favorite places to eat, especially on nights when we both have to work late."

Molly inhaled the scent of flavored meat and beans. "I can't tell you how many of those tacos and bean burritos I ate when I was in high school."

That, at least, was one memory that wasn't painful.

"Not as many as I did," Emma said, coming out to greet Luke with a swift kiss. Her hair was still wet and she'd changed into yoga pants and a tank top.

"Did you go to a tanning salon?" Molly asked.

Emma wrinkled her nose. "No. But I'm trying out a spray tan. What do you think? Too orange?"

"No. Actually, it looks really good on you. I hate you for that."

Emma grabbed plates and Luke poured tea for both of them, then they pulled up seats at the kitchen table. "I don't know why. You're tan. Have you been swimming or something?"

"There's a pool at my condo. It's my leftover-from-summer tan."

"Oh. Perfect. You have that sun-kissed look. Not surprising since you live down south now. The weather must be great in Austin."

"It's good there. I like it."

Emma grabbed a taco. "For now, right?"

Molly shot her an enigmatic smile. "For now. I have a great job doing accounting and marketing for a music company. You should visit. It's an amazing city."

"We should. When the dust settles post-wedding and honeymoon, we'll take a road trip. If you're still there." Emma winked.

"Great." It was a known fact that Molly never spent more than six months to a year in one spot. Then, wanderlust or an uncomfortable itch to move on set in—she tried to never put a label on it—and she'd find yet another job in another city.

It made her parents crazy, and it worried Emma. But for Molly, it had become the norm. She liked moving around. It gave her a chance to see different parts of the country. What was so wrong about that?

She bit into the burrito and rolled her eyes heavenward. After she swallowed, she looked at Emma and Luke. "I missed these—so much."

“I imagine you get some great burritos in Austin,” Emma said.

“Oh, definitely. And I know these are from a fast-food chain and all, but Taco Bueno has memories associated with it.”

Emma grinned. “Stopping for a taco after school.”

“And on Friday nights,” Molly said with a grin. “It just reminds me of home.”

“You wouldn’t miss them if you’d come home once in a while.”

She answered with a shrug. “I’m here now. And they were worth the wait.”

They ate and she listened to Emma and Luke discuss their days. She and Emma talked at least once a week, so she was familiar with their jobs. Luke was busy as a local cop in Hope, and Emma had her hands full running the vet clinic. They were both successful, and ridiculously in love with each other. Luke scraped taco sauce off the corner of Emma’s mouth, and Emma listened intently to Luke’s story about a rear-end collision he’d worked today, offering sympathy as he told them about one of the occupants’ injuries.

The way Emma looked at Luke was the same way Molly used to look at—

No point in going there. That had been a long time ago. She never even thought about him anymore.

“So tell me what’s on the agenda for this wedding shindig,” Molly said after they cleaned up the remnants of their fast-food fest. Luke had taken the dogs outside, leaving Emma and Molly to catch up in the living room.

“You and I are going to head to the bridal salon for a final fitting tomorrow. We should be fine, and we’ll bring the dresses home. Ours will go to Mom’s, of course, because we’ll be getting ready there the day of the wedding. Oh, and we’re meeting Jane and Chelsea at the bridal shop.”

“Okay.”

“Luke’s brother Reid flies in from Boston tomorrow as well, but Luke’s taking care of picking him up. The rehearsal dinner is Friday, then the wedding at the country club on Saturday. We’re going to do a brunch Sunday with the families, then Luke and I head out on Monday for Hawaii.”

Molly grinned. “My guess is that you and Luke are way more excited about Hawaii than anything else.”

Emma laughed. “You would guess right. Though I am looking forward to being married. Finally. It’s taken a lot of planning, but it’s going to happen.”

Molly grasped her hand. “I’m so happy for the two of you, Em. Luke’s a great guy.”

“He is. And thanks. I want the same thing for you, Moll.”

“Oh, well. You know, I’m not even close to being ready to settle down.”

“And why is that? With all the traveling you’ve done, haven’t you found one place that suits you yet? Or a guy who makes you want to put down roots?”

“Uh, no.” There’d never be a guy who’d make her want to stay in one place. Never. She’d planted her flag in

a guy's heart once, and love had devastated her. She never wanted to go there again. "I like my freedom too much."

"And speaking of guys . . . you are aware Carter is in the wedding, right?"

Just the mention of his name made her pulse kick up several beats. "Of course. You told me."

"I know you two broke up in high school, but you've never talked about it."

Molly shrugged. "Nothing to talk about, really."

Other than the utter destruction of her heart.

"He is Luke's best friend. Are you sure you're okay with this?"

No, she wasn't okay with it. She was hoping he'd be out of town and unable to make the wedding. Too much to hope for, of course. And running into him at the bakery had been an awful start to her trip. One she wasn't going to mention to her sister. "Of course, Em. I'm fine with it. High school was a long time ago, you know. I'm so over Carter."

She'd never be over Carter, or what had happened between them. But this was Emma and Luke's wedding, and she was going to be an adult about it. Nothing was going to spoil Emma and Luke's big day.

Her heart was just going to have to suck it up and take it. Then, after the wedding, she'd hightail it out of Hope and never look back.

Just like she'd done twelve years ago, when she'd left town to escape the heartbreak.

Only this time, she wouldn't be heartbroken, because she'd never allow that to happen again.

### Chapter 3

AFTER RUNNING INTO Molly yesterday, Carter had buried himself in the dreaded paperwork. It was only because he'd interviewed a guy for the vacant body repair position that he'd happened to be in Hope during the day and then decided to just spend the rest of the workweek here because of the wedding stuff going on. And because he'd happened to be here, he'd also happened to see Molly, something he'd hoped to avoid until the wedding.

Of course if he'd just stayed at the shop, he could have prevented her unhappiness, and his damn bad mood. So he had no one to blame but himself.

And the interviewing wasn't going well, either. He was beginning to think he was never going to find a decent body guy. Good thing he had some of the other guys to fill in, and if worse came to worst, he could do some of the bodywork himself, though that wasn't his preference. Every now and then he enjoyed getting his hands dirty, but overseeing the shops was enough of a full-time job these days.

When he'd first started out, he'd worked for Mo Bennett, who owned the shop he was at today. Carter always had a feel for cars, had started learning about them with his dad when he was a kid. His dad had worked for Mo, and Carter had come in with him on weekends, sitting by and watching until he was old enough to get under the hood and tinker on them himself. Mo had hired him at sixteen, and by the time he

turned twenty-two and Mo was ready to retire, Carter had gotten a loan and bought the place. Over the years Carter expanded the garage and brought in auto body guys, then branched out and bought another shop several years later.

Now there were four Richards Auto Service garages, one in Hope and three more in surrounding areas, including nearby in Tulsa. He'd worked his ass off to become a success, put himself in debt up to his eyeballs, but he was in the black finally. He might not get to work on the cars, which he loved, as much as he used to, but he'd made enough to buy a house and he lived comfortably enough that he could sleep at night without worrying about money.

These days if anything kept him up at night it was his personal life—or lack of personal life. The absence of a special woman. Not that finding the right woman had ever been front burner for him before. He'd dated plenty, and women had come into and gone out of his life without a lot of fuss.

Maybe it was seeing Molly again that reminded him of the plans they'd made twelve years ago. Plans that had never come to be. Plans he'd put on hold while he concentrated on work, on building his business.

He shoved aside the paperwork and stood, stretched his back, and decided to go take a look out in the shop. Sitting at his desk gave him too much time to think, mainly about things he shouldn't be thinking about.

Diving headfirst into an engine or body repair would clear his head, and that's just what he needed on a day like today.

\* \* \*

MOLLY PARKED GEORGE in the driveway of her parents' house, needing a few minutes to catch her breath before she went inside to face the hordes.

Catching up with Emma had been fun, but she had to admit she'd been distracted, her thoughts straying to her meeting with Carter yesterday.

Of all the people she hadn't wanted to run into, she'd walked outside the bakery to find him leaning over her car.

He'd looked good. No, he'd looked hot, with jeans that fit his oh-so-fine ass perfectly, a polo shirt that defined his muscled biceps. He was lean and fit, and he wore his dark hair shorter than he had in high school, but those green eyes of his still mesmerized her.

And he'd been . . . nice. How dare he be nice to her, after what he'd done?

It felt like all the air had been sucked out of her lungs, and even now—a day later—she still found it hard to breathe when she thought about him. As she'd driven over here, she was afraid she was going to run into him, which was ridiculous. Hope was a small town, but it wasn't that small.

She needed to get a grip or her mother, who was observant of all things, was going to notice. Then she'd get questioned incessantly, and she wouldn't be able to deal with it.

She took several deep breaths, relying on her yoga training to calm herself inwardly and block out the negative.

It wasn't really working, because every time she closed her eyes, Carter's face swam before her.

She was just going to have to fake it as best she could and hope the impending wedding extravaganza stuff would take precedence over any of her peculiar behavior. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was used to her being around anyway. How would they know what was normal for her these days?

She opened the front door into a house filled with people. Aunts and uncles had arrived, as well as Emma's friends, Chelsea and Jane.

Home. She had grown up here, yet it didn't feel like her home anymore. Too much time had passed, and even though so many things looked familiar to her, like the fireplace where she and Emma used to sit and sing together, and the kitchen table where they'd eat breakfast before school, a lot had changed. There was new carpet and new living room furniture, and Mom had changed the paint scheme on some of the walls.

*Life goes on without you, Molly. Deal with it.*

"Molly, you're here!"

Her mother hurried over, a bright smile on her face.

Her mother's love and smiles, however, would never change, and she was so grateful for that.

Molly dropped several boxes of donuts on the kitchen counter along with the foam cup filled with coffee she'd picked up at Megan's shop this morning.

Her mother grasped her hands. "Let me look at you."

"You just saw me a month ago when you came to visit."

"Shh. I know that. But I still miss you every day." Her mom gave her the once-over. "You look beautiful, as always."

Molly laughed. "Thanks, Mom. You're good for my ego."

Her parents' dog, Pokey, a miniature dachshund, came over to sniff her.

"Hey, Pokey, how's it going?" She bent down to love on the dog, picking him up to hold him. Her parents brought Pokey along whenever they came to visit, so she had a little taste of having a pet whenever she saw them, since most of the apartments where she lived didn't allow animals.

"He's happy to see you."

She ran her fingers over Pokey's back. "I'm happy to see him, too. And everyone else. The house is full of people."

"Come on, put the dog down and say hello to everyone."

Not that she'd have a choice, since her mother firmly held her hand and dragged her around like she was eight years old. She listened to the admonishments of her aunts about how it had been way too long since she'd been back in Hope, and was firmly hugged by her uncles.

When she had endured enough, she kissed her mom on the cheek, then headed out back where Emma, Jane, and Chelsea were enjoying coffee.

“Hi, everyone.”

“Molly. It’s so great to see you. It’s been too long.” Chelsea got up to give her a hug, and Jane, did, too.

“It’s great to see you both,” Molly said. This part, at least, was easy. She might not have seen Chelsea and Jane for a long time, but they’d talked a lot on the phone and Skyped over wedding details the past several months, so it was nice to be able to sit down with them in person.

“I see you already got yours,” Emma said as they all took seats.

Molly lifted her cup. “I couldn’t wait, since I was on donut-fetching duty this morning.”

“Lucky you,” Chelsea said. “Emma’s mom called me at seven this morning and gave me a grocery list.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “She did not.”

“She did. Juice and milk and oh, she needed two loaves of bread. She was going to go herself, but there were people at the house and she didn’t want to be rude.”

Emma snorted. “I’m surprised I didn’t get that list. And I’m really sorry she just assumed you’d run errands for her. I’ll talk to her.”

“You’ll do no such thing. You’re the bride, honey,” Chelsea said. “We’re the minions. It was no problem, and the store’s on my way over here.”

Emma blew out a breath. “Thank you. This will all be over soon. I promise.”

“Is the stress getting to you?” Molly asked.

“Just the past week or so. It had been fairly calm and organized before that, but now it seems as if there’s some crisis, or some detail that needs attending to every day.”

“It has been intense, Emma, but you have to trust us all,” Jane said. “We’ll take care of it. We have taken care of everything so far, haven’t we?”

Now Molly felt even guiltier that she hadn’t been here for all those details. She should have never agreed to be the maid of honor. She sucked at this. She hadn’t even come to the wedding shower. Chelsea and Jane had been lifesavers, handling everything in Molly’s absence and telling her not to worry that she couldn’t make it.

“Yes, you have taken care of everything.”

“And now Molly’s here, which is what you were worried about the most,” Jane said, offering Molly a genuine smile.

Which made Molly feel even worse, because Jane and Chelsea didn’t pass judgment on her stupid idiosyncrasies. Like her abject fear about returning home.

“Emma, can you come here for a minute? Aunt Louise wants to take a picture of you with all of us.”

Emma shot a panicked look at all of them before smiling and standing. “Sure, Mom.”

After Emma went inside, Jane turned to them. “I’m glad Will and I did the small wedding. Between his job and mine, and both the kids, we had enough to deal with.”

“Hey, you had a party at the house, at least,” Chelsea said. “It was a great one, too.”

“Yes. With catered barbecue.” Jane looked to Molly. “I got barbecue sauce on my dress. There are lovely photos of a very inappropriately placed stain.”

Molly laughed. “But did you have fun?”

“We did. Our friends were there, our families were there, we love each other, and it’s done. Now we’re one family—me, him, and my kids. Correction—our kids.”

“How’s the adoption process going?” Chelsea asked.

“Good. Faster than I thought it would.”

“You’re adopting?” Molly asked.

Jane shook her head. “Will’s adopting my kids from my first marriage. Long story short, my ex abandoned us, he lost his parental rights. Will loves those kids like they’re his, and they love him as well. He wants them to be his.”

Molly sat back. “How do the kids feel about him adopting them?”

“We had a lot of heart-to-hearts. They’re sad about their father, but they understand now that he’s not coming back into their lives. And they love Will. He’s their father now. They want him and they want his name. It’s what I want as well, but ultimately, the kids had to be on board with it. Even though they’re young, they had to believe in Will and love him like a father, which they do.”

“Sounds like you have a perfect family.”

Jane smiled. “Oh, far from it. We’re a work in progress, but it’s right for us. There’s a lot of love, and that’ll get us through anything.”

Molly once thought love was enough as well, but it hadn’t been. It hadn’t even been close. Then again, she’d mistaken something else for what she thought was love. Passion and the stupidity of youth.

She wasn’t a teenager anymore but she wasn’t stupid, either. She’d grown up a lot over the years and she’d learned to be more cautious. She’d never confuse passion with love again. Too many mistakes could be made.

“So, how are you liking Austin?” Chelsea asked.

“I love the pace there. It’s very hip and music oriented. I think I might stay there awhile.”

“That would be a first for you, wouldn’t it?”

Taken aback, Molly could only stare at Chelsea.

“Sorry, I tell it like it is. I don’t mean any offense. But you move around a lot, don’t you?”



“That’s true. I’ve got a case of wanderlust, I guess. I always think a place is the perfect fit—until something better comes along.”

“Kind of like Chelsea and men,” Jane said with a smirk.

Chelsea shot Jane a look. “Hey. I am not at all like that. Besides, it’s been three months since I’ve been out on a decent date.”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said. “Define *decent date*.”

“Dinner and a good movie. Followed up by drinks at his place or mine, and a hot kiss to end the evening.”

“Or hot breakfast the next morning?” Jane wagged her brows.

“No, that would be a *perfect* date. I’d be satisfied with decent at this point.”

Molly laughed. “A bit of a dry spell?”

“Honey, you don’t know the half of it. It’s like every available man in this town has pulled up stakes and moved to Alaska.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Jane said. “I’ve fixed you up with several eligible men. You’re just too picky.”

Chelsea studied her nails. “I am picky. And I have high expectations.” She fluffed her gorgeous red hair. “But I’m worth it.”

“There you go,” Molly said, taking another sip of her coffee. “Never settle for less than the best.”

“Is that what you’re looking for, Molly?” Jane asked. “The best?”

“Me?” She laughed. “I’m not looking at all.”

## Chapter 4

HANGING OUT WITH the guys was so much more fun than dealing with women and all the baggage they brought to the table. Carter knew he’d be hung from the nearest tree if his mom ever heard him say that—or any of his ex-girlfriends. But none of them were here right now. Just his best friend Luke, Luke’s brothers, Reid and Logan, and Will Griffin, all of them groomsmen in the wedding.

They were currently sitting in the No Hope At All bar, run by Sebastian Palmer, or “Bash,” as everyone called him.

“This round of tequila shots is on me,” Will said, ponying up the money.

Bash lined up the shots, including one for himself. He’d closed down the bar for the day, since he was in the wedding, too.

“I’m monitoring all your drinking. If you show up drunk for the rehearsal dinner, it’s my ass on the line,” Bash said.

“To Bash,” Will said.

They all downed their drinks. “No, wait,” Will said. “That wasn’t my toast. Another round.”

“You all suck,” Reid said, shaking his head. “You can’t even get drunk right.”

“Oh, and you can?” Luke crossed his arms. “Wait. Tell me. They drink better in Boston, too.”

“Hell yeah.”

“You wanna take him out back and beat the shit out of him?” Logan asked.

Luke laughed. “That might be fun.”

“You two don’t scare me anymore like you did when we were kids. Besides, I can drink you both under the table and then kick both your asses.”

Logan snorted. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I’ll lay money on Reid,” Carter said, giving Reid a critical once-over. “He looks like he’s been doing Krav Maga. His arms are beefier than the last time he was here.”

Luke frowned. “You’d take my little brother over me?”

“Somebody has to.”

Reid slapped him on the back. “Thanks, Carter.”

Bash rolled his eyes, but poured the drinks. “Last one. I’m locking up the tequila.”

“Does that mean you’re pulling out the whiskey next?” Carter asked with a grin.

“You wish, Richards. No, this is the last round. Then I’m making coffee, so none of our law enforcement officials sitting here—or their friends—arrests us.

“I could get us a highway patrol escort,” Will said. “Then none of us have to drive.”

“Yeah, but we’d still be drunk,” Logan said, taking the glass Bash had poured. “So do your toast, Will, and we’ll be good boys. Because nothing’s worse than a pissed-off woman.”

“True that,” Will said, then turned to Luke. “To your last day as a single man.”

Luke groaned. “Again.”

“Try and do it better the second time than you did the first,” Logan said.

“It’ll help that the second wife is a much better choice than your first one,” Carter said.

“A-fucking-men to that,” Luke said. “Let’s drink.”

They took their shots, then Bash cleared the bar and poured them all sodas and coffee.

Carter grimaced as he took a sip of the coffee Bash had poured for him. “The tequila was better.”

“You say that now,” Logan said. “Until Emma’s mom knocks your drunken ass down over dinner.”

“Good point.” He drank two cups of coffee, had a soda, and by the time they left, felt clearheaded. He was glad he hadn’t driven Rhonda today, though. He’d bring her to the restaurant tonight. Not that he wanted to show off for anyone in particular.

Okay, maybe he did.

After they left the bar, he went home, showered, changed into his navy blue suit that he didn’t much want to wear, but when Georgia Burnett told you to wear a suit, you wore a suit. She said they were going to church tonight, and even though it was just for rehearsal, they were still going to be in God’s house and you had to dress up.

You didn’t get on Georgia’s bad side. After picking out a tie, he climbed into Rhonda and headed over to the church. He pulled into the lot and parked, then got out, straightened his tie, and walked through the front doors.

It was quiet except for the sounds of voices coming from the front of the church. Emma and Luke were already there, along with Reid and Logan. Logan’s girlfriend, Desiree, was there as well. And there was no mistaking Chelsea’s fiery red hair as she sat in the front pew next to Jane.

And over where Emma’s parents were talking to the minister stood Molly, wearing a dress that hugged her body all the way to her waist, then flowed out from her hips. The dress had bright flowers on it, but honestly, all he noticed were her bare shoulders and her tan skin. Her hair was loose, waves cascading halfway down her back. She sported high heels that had no business being worn in a church, showcasing legs he had no business thinking about in a church, either.

“Got some sins to confess, buddy?” Bash slapped him on the back and gave him a smirk.

“Probably.”

“Why don’t you save it for another day? Let’s get this shindig going. I’m starving.”

“So what you’re saying is, you’re just in it for the food.”

“Oh, no. I’m totally here for Luke and Emma’s happily-ever-after. I’m all about the love, man.”

They walked down the aisle. “It’s not good to lie in church, Bash.”

Bash gave him a lopsided grin as they made it to the front of the church.

“Is everyone here?” the minister asked.

Emma’s mother looked around. “Yes, I believe so.”

“Then we’ll get started. For those who don’t know me, I’m Reverend Barry Greenwood, and I’ll be performing the service tomorrow. I like things informal, so please call me Barry.”

Barry got things in order in a hurry. He sent the bride, her parents, and the bridesmaids down to the back of the church, and Luke and the guys set up at the front. Luke stood first in line, followed by Logan, his best man, then Reid, Carter, and Will.

“I’ll be first in line to grab him if he makes a run for it,” Will said with a grin.

“I don’t think he has any intention of running. Look at his face.”

Will looked around the guys, then shook his head. “You’re right. He’s like a lovesick puppy.”

“Kind of disgusting, isn’t it?” Logan asked.

Carter rolled his eyes. “You’re even worse the way you’re looking at Des.”

Logan grinned. “She’s been on a movie shoot for six weeks and just got back three days ago. How am I supposed to look at her?”

“I’m surprised you’re even here,” Reid said, glancing down the aisle at Desiree. “She looks hot.”

“I could kick your . . . You’re lucky we’re in church, kid.”

Carter laughed, but then Bash started up the aisle with Emma’s mom, so they all had to straighten up. He delivered her to the front row, then Evan, Luke’s friend on the police force, escorted Martha down the aisle. Though Martha wasn’t technically family, she was the McCormacks’ housekeeper and the closest thing Luke, Logan, and Reid had to a mother since their own had abandoned them. And she had a grin a mile wide at being considered the mother figure at Luke’s wedding.

The bridesmaids started down, with Barry informing them about how to walk.

“Not too fast, ladies. This isn’t a race. But don’t take all day, either.”

Carter was fascinated with Molly’s walk, especially since she did everything in her power to avoid making eye contact with him as she made her way down the aisle and over to where the rest of the bridesmaids were standing.

Jane’s six-year-old daughter Tabitha was going to be the flower girl. She had such a serious face as she practiced walking down the aisle with a plastic basket. Tomorrow, it would be filled with flowers.

Cute.

Then Emma’s dad walked her down the aisle. Luke cleared his throat.

“It’s just the rehearsal, Luke. You don’t get to choke up until tomorrow,” Logan said.

“Yeah, yeah.”

They went through the motions, with Barry explaining what would happen at every step. It went pretty fast, which was good, because, like Bash, Carter was hungry. So when Barry told them they were good to go, everyone headed out to the restaurant.

Bash rode with him.

“Taking Rhonda tonight, huh?” he asked on the way.

“Yeah. She’s my date.” Nothing like taking your ’67 Mustang Shelby as your date for the night. She was also going to be his date tomorrow. Less complicated that way. He typically didn’t bring a date to a wedding, and he especially didn’t need or want one at this event. He had enough issues to deal with.

They were going to have dinner in Tulsa at the Polo Grill on Utica Square. Emma's parents had provided the rehearsal dinner, and Georgia Burnett had fine dining down to an art form. She'd booked a private room, so they all gathered in there, where cocktails were provided.

Carter headed for the bar to order a whiskey, straight up, determined to ignore Molly the rest of the night.

Except she was dragged to the bar by Jane and Chelsea and Emma before he had a chance to get out of the way and go hide among his friends.

"Carter. You brought Rhonda with you tonight," Chelsea said.

"Yup."

Molly cocked a brow, then looked around. "Who's Rhonda?"

"His car."

She smirked. "You named your car?"

He shot her a look. "*You* named *your* car."

"That's different," she said with a shrug.

"In what way?"

"Never mind."

He took another drink, figuring the less said, the better, since their first meeting didn't go all that well.

"Oh, you have to see Rhonda," Jane said to Molly. "You'll understand then. Let's go outside and you can show her, Carter."

Such a bad idea. But Emma already had Molly by the hand, pulling her toward the door, so he downed the contents of his whiskey in one swallow, then followed the women outside.

There was no doubt about it, Rhonda was impressive. He always kept her gleaming, and her navy body paint with white stripes stood out in the crowded parking lot. She got a lot of looks from passersby as well.

"Oh. So that's Rhonda," Molly said.

"Yup."

"I can see why you'd name her. She's a beauty." Molly turned to face him. "It was always your dream to own a '67 Shelby."

He was surprised she remembered. "Yeah, it was."

"You must be doing very well."

"I'm doing okay."

"He's doing better than okay. He owns four auto repair shops now," Emma said with a wide smile. "Worked his butt off over the years. At least that's what Luke tells me."

“Worth the hard work for something like Rhonda. She’d go very well with my hair,” Chelsea said with a wink.

“I’ll take you for a ride in her sometime.”

“It’d be more fun if I got to drive her.”

Carter shook his head. “No one drives Rhonda but me.”

Chelsea sighed. “You’re no fun, Carter.”

He slanted his gaze toward Molly, who looked as miserable as he felt.

“We’d better go back inside before people start missing us,” Emma said.

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