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# HOT ENOUGH TO KILL



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# Chapter One

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I generally find myself back in the thriving metropolis of Kickapoo, Texas, for reasons that are either beyond my control or my good sense. Sometimes both. I've come back to my hometown for holidays, so-called vacations and entirely too many funerals. The only thread of commonality in these events is that I am guaranteed to experience some level of unpleasantness. It's one of those facts of nature, like washing your car so it will rain. I show up in Kickapoo and bad things are sure to follow. Only this time, the first bad thing had already happened. Somebody had shot my seventy-two-year-old mother's boyfriend. Shot him dead. On purpose.

Now, before I explain the whos and what-fors of the murder, you need to know a few things about my mother. Lucille Jackson takes no guff off anybody. Those are her words, not mine.

No longer auburn-haired, she's still a striking woman and credits her current "natural blonde" look to a weekly dousing of a rinse called "Frisolous Fawn." But don't think I'm comparing the woman to a gentle deer frolicking in a meadow. Unless Bambi's developed a fondness for whimsical costume jewelry and wild purple pantsuits, it just doesn't work. A better visual might be a cosmetically enhanced pterodactyl with a glitter-covered chip on her shoulder and a real bad attitude. Of course I could be letting my latent childhood hostilities taint my assessment.

And to be fair, my mother holds an equally unflattering opinion of me, something along the lines of "ungrateful and man-less daughter intent on squandering her looks and journalism degree by hiding in the mountains of Colorado" covers most of the bases. We do, however, love one another in our own ways.

When my dad died of a heart attack two years ago, it took Mother a good while to come out of her shock. When she did, she did it in a

big way. Or at least a scandalous one. She started dating the mayor. Unfortunately, the mayor still had a wife. Now the truth is, the mayor and his spouse hadn't lived together in years and hadn't even liked each other when they had. This is all beside the point, of course, because no matter how you sliced it, my mother's boyfriend had still been legally married to another woman. I was so proud.

Lucille, the queen of rationalization, did not share my dismay. She found Mr. Mayor's nebulous marital state to be perfectly acceptable because she didn't ever want to remarry anyway. Closer to the point, there apparently weren't many hot hunks pushing seventy to choose from in Kickapoo, Texas — population 1,024, or rather 1,023 living souls and one dead mayor. Which brings me right back to the reason I'm sweltering in 112-degree heat — and that's inside the building — waiting for my mother to come sauntering out of the county jail so I can take her home. It's not your typical family reunion spot, but Lucille is anything but typical.

That said, you can understand why I wasn't particularly surprised that I heard her before I saw her. Lucille commands attention, one way or another.

"I don't know what lies you've been told, Jolene," Mother said, bursting through the door to the county lock-up waiting area. She sashayed past a deputy, past me and toward the exit, her heels clicking out an ominous beat. "These people know good and well that I didn't kill BigJohn, not that he didn't need a what-for, the old goat." With her nose stuck up in the air and a black patent leather purse swinging from her elbow, Lucille marched out of the Bowman County courthouse and toward my dark blue Chevy Tahoe.

I dutifully followed, wondering exactly how best to handle this somewhat ticklish situation. No clear plan emerged, so I figured I ought to try to be the good and attentive daughter she'd always wished for. I clicked up the latches, opened her door, then hurried around to the driver's side to start the car — and the blessed air conditioner. I wriggled inside, hoping to keep the thin fabric of my shorts between me and the Texas-fried leather seat. The skin on the backs of my thighs sizzled as it bonded to the seat, but I started the car and said not a word, knowing Lucille would not appreciate my ugly thoughts about either the heat or her predicament. I also knew she'd spill her guts about the whole sordid mayor affair soon enough without any coaxing.

After a predictable show of climbing into "that monster truck," as she called it, Lucille settled herself into the passenger side and pointed all the air conditioner vents toward her face.

"Good heavens, I'm glad to be free," she said, patting her piled-high hair. "Nobody knows what I've been through. What took you so long to get here? Those no-account deputies wouldn't listen to a thing I said. Asking their silly questions over and over, and then talking to me like I was some dirty criminal when I didn't say just what they wanted to hear." She huffed and clucked her tongue. "I did get my own room, though."

"Your own room?"

"Well, I don't think the whole world needs to know that Lucille Jackson was put in a jail cell. Me, in jail! Why the very nerve of those people."

Technically, I was one of the "nervy" people since I'd agreed that Lucille should wait with the deputies until I arrived. It had seemed the best thing to do at the time, although I wasn't going to confess my part in her captivity or try to explain my good intentions. That sort of thing has never worked, trust me. And while we're busy setting the record straight, Lucille had spent her time in an office, not a jail cell, and had apparently been quite content to use the department's telephone and call her friends while she waited for her only child to pick her up. That was the official version. I couldn't wait to hear my mother's interpretation.

Lucille reached into her purse and dug out a tissue. After a good blow and sniff, she said, "It was the silliest thing, really. I was up at the Dairy Queen, minding my own business, having a nice glass of iced tea with Agnes Riddles and Merline Campbell, and the next thing I knew these two big old goons had jerked me out of my chair and tossed me into the back of their patrol car like some dirty criminal. It was just a crying shame, I tell you, treating me like that. Why that Jerry Don Parker wouldn't even be sheriff if it weren't for your father, God rest his soul. And what does he do to repay me? Why, he sends his big old goons out to haul me in like some thug, and right in front of the whole town."

The town was small, but not small enough for the entire populace to fit inside the Dairy Queen, particularly one with a maximum capacity sign that read 56. There were additional corrections I could make to her story, but decided to just hit the high points. "Those goons, as you call them, said you refused to talk to them and that you threatened to

‘kick both of their butts’ — that was a quote — if they laid a hand on you.”

“Humph,” Lucille snorted. “They were manhandling me and I don’t put up with that from anybody.”

When I didn’t respond immediately, she tipped up her nose and stared out the window, suddenly enthralled by the landscape — or lack thereof.

The fourteen-mile stretch of melting asphalt from Bowman City to Kickapoo is about as straight and flat as they come, and the scenery amounts to scrub mesquite trees with more thorns than leaves. Breaking up the monotony, or adding to it, depending upon your perspective, are oil wells — lots of them — pumping like big, lethargic chickens playing perpetual tug-of-war with skinny worms of iron cable. Beautiful, really. Just makes you want to pull off the road and set up a tripod. And did I mention it’s at least 125 degrees in the shade with triple-digit humidity?

But on the bright side, there are a lot of really nice folks living around here, give you the shirts off their backs and all that. Unfortunately, in the midst of these fine, upstanding, salt-of-the-earth folks lurked a rather nasty killer.

I could feel a vortex forming around me, building, ready to suck me into the madness. In my high school and college years, before I figured out I wasn’t cut out to be a reporter, a story about small-town intrigue and one dead mayor would have had me doing handstands. I’d have plunged in with no holds barred to get to the truth and would have whipped out a dandy article. But not now, and especially not with my mother hanging over my shoulder. I am smarter than that, thank you very much. According to Lucille, I can’t even find the right hair color (Clairol’s Light Ash Brown, if you’re wondering), so I certainly couldn’t be counted on to ferret out a killer in the highly sophisticated locale of Kickapoo, Texas.

Nope, I was not about to get myself involved in this mess. I’d stay just long enough to be sure mother kept herself out of trouble. Then it would be back to the mountains and sanity for me. I’d call the kids (grown, but still my kids), tell them how much I missed them, meet them in Boulder for a nice dinner, mention the little problem with their grandmother and that would be that. Done and forgotten.

Then, as if my nineteen-year-old son were sitting right beside me, I heard, “Gee, Mom, I can’t believe you’re going to just abandon Gran, leave her down there all by herself with a murderer.” The twenty-year-

old daughter’s voice was equally clear with “Gran wouldn’t turn her back on you, Mom, no matter what you did.”

Guilt and denial have tended to be the two most prominent factors in my life, and this time guilt was the indisputable winner. Okay, so I wouldn’t run off right away, and maybe it wouldn’t hurt if I asked a few questions here and there, just to be on the safe side. “Dammit,” I muttered, shifting in the seat, highly uncomfortable on a number of levels.

“It is awful. I just cannot imagine,” Mother said, seriously misinterpreting my muttering for sympathy, “how anybody could think I’d shoot BigJohn.”

I waited a few beats, but when she didn’t end her dismay with the expected “I loved him,” I decided to get just a little clearer on the exact nature of the relationship between my mother and BigJohn. “So exactly how friendly were you and Mayor Bennett?”

“Well,” she said, with an indignant sniff, or maybe it was a cocky huff, “we practically lived together for three months, not that I let him stay the night at my house, mind you. He sure as heck knew I wouldn’t be washing his dirty old socks or cooking for him either. I’ve done my share of that and I’m not doing it any more.” She took a short breath, seemed to compose herself a little, then shrugged. “It was something to do though. We went out to nice places, had a good time. Never had any problems, really, unless he brought up *her*.”

“His wife?”

“Ex-wife.”

“They got a divorce?”

Mother shrugged. “Same as. I saw a big stack of papers he got from the lawyer, but I didn’t look at them. Didn’t need to. I made it real plain that I wasn’t going to marry him under any circumstances. Any circumstances.” She sat a little taller and patted her hair. “He sure wanted to marry me though, I’ll tell you that.”

“Well, I guess whether he got his divorce or not doesn’t much matter now, does it?” I asked, watching her from the corner of my eye lest a tear creep out when I wasn’t looking. It didn’t. “I might add that you don’t seem overly aggrieved about his death either.”

“Well, of course I’ll miss him,” she said, sounding mildly sincere. “He was no Bertram, I’ll tell you for sure, but he did have his good points.”

Posthumously, Bertram Jackson had become the perfect husband — a strange metamorphosis considering my recollection that he gener-

ally stayed in as much trouble with Lucille as I did, or do. At some point I was going to call her on that little technicality, but now didn't seem the right time. Besides, in a weird way, I was pleased that BigJohn's dying hadn't elevated him to the same sainted status my father now held.

I was mulling over the fact that my mother and I could keep a panel of psychologists gainfully employed well into the twenty-third century when she said, "I didn't advertise it, you know, but he hadn't been very nice to me lately. The old goat made me so mad I could just spit."

This was a figure of speech, as Lucille does not spit, even when she brushes her teeth, but I got the idea. The red glow in her eyes was pretty telling also. I tried to look sympathetic. "Things got kind of bad between you two?"

"I told him he ought to just go on back to his dumb old plain vanilla wife since they were both crazy as loons and ought to live in the loony bin together. Suppose that was just what he was doing since she showed up in town not three days after our set-to."

Lucille spoke with more venom than a ten-foot rattlesnake and her lips were drawn up into a terse little pucker. Apparently the wife, ex or otherwise, was a touchy subject.

"I never saw their carryings-on, mind you," she continued, nostrils flaring. "But people told me they were flaunting themselves around town, acting like newlyweds, that self-righteous, hypocritical jackass. He was over at my house every single day of the week and calling me sixteen times a day and then, poof." She snapped her fingers, a good trick considering the inch-long acrylics glued to the tips. "Just like that it was over. Not one word from him. Nothing. The way I figure it, he got just what he deserved, and I'm not about to be shedding any tears over it."

No, she surely wasn't. And furthermore, it sounded like she was quite pleased that BigJohn had been put out of her misery. Not good. Not good at all.

I drove toward Kickapoo on autopilot, trying to make myself face the unpleasant question: Did she do it? I couldn't believe it was even a possibility, but then again her mental state hadn't been a model of normalcy since she was widowed. Not a comforting thought.

In fact, about the only comforting thoughts I could find were related to my children. Specifically, since both my kids were basically

grown, I wouldn't have to sit them down and euphemistically explain why Gran had to move to a new house with bars on the windows and razor wire around the yard. They'd understand just fine. And blame me for it all. Sarah and Matt, being considerate and thoughtful children, always sided with their grandmother on just about everything, and everything generally meant that whatever my opinion happened to be was the wrong one. I was tempted to call the little darlings in their dorms and tell them to get themselves down here and take over the joyous task of keeping dear Gran out of trouble. That would change their traitorous little tunes in a hurry.

Deciding that there really were no comforting thoughts after all, I wrenched one hand from the steering wheel long enough to rub my pounding temples. "Really, Mother, you've got to be careful what you say in public. You're already an obvious suspect, and talking about being glad BigJohn's dead tends to move you up to the top of the list."

"It's a free country, Jolene, and I'll say whatever I please whenever I please. Besides, I know I didn't kill the old goat, and I don't much care what that Jerry Don Parker thinks. Never knew what you saw in him anyway," she said, dismissing my concerns with the wave of an elegant hand. "I told you that boy would never amount to a hill of beans, and I was right," she went on. "Locking up an old, frail woman and treating her like dirt. Why, I never heard of such a thing. I tell you, they were all just ugly to me, Jolene. Plain ugly. And that Jerry Don Parker was the worst of the lot. You just have no idea what I've been through."

Oh, yes, I did, and it was basically nothing unless you counted what all she brought on herself. "It seems to me, Mother, if anybody was mistreated, it was Jerry. He said you smacked him in the head with your fifty-two-pound purse."

"It was an accident," she muttered. "And my purse doesn't weigh nearly that much. Besides, he had it coming."

Mother wholeheartedly believes in folks getting what's coming to them, unless of course it's coming to her.

"You're not allowed to hit the sheriff, Mother."

"I'm just glad you didn't marry that brute," she said, ignoring my comment.

I winced before I realized how much the offhand marriage comment had stung. I also recalled that Lucille was the one who threw

seven kinds of fits when I told her that I wasn't marrying Jerry, and furthermore, I wasn't hanging around Redwater Falls for college but was heading to Austin, pronto. I wasn't sure which upset her most, but she always — and I mean always — thought Jerry Don Parker hung the moon, to use her words. I agreed with her on that, and maybe that had been part of the problem, not that I wanted to analyze decisions I'd made as a headstrong seventeen-year-old kid.

"Of course," Lucille said, "he'd have certainly turned out better if you had married him. Couldn't be much worse."

Shoving aside the big ball of regrets that seemed to knot up my stomach whenever I thought about my choices concerning Jerry Don Parker, I tried to focus on the grown-up Jerry of today. Regardless of my mother's melodrama, she knew very well that Jerry hadn't exactly turned out too bad, to seriously understate the facts.

He'd been the best looking guy in high school and he looked even better now. Not a dead ringer for the new James Bond, but close enough to send your basic female heart to fluttering. Texas accent rather than British, of course.

Jerry had also earned a degree in criminal justice and worked in federal law enforcement for several years before returning to his hometown to raise his kids. I'd debate the merits of that last decision, but he hadn't asked my opinion in the matter. He'd had a perfect little blonde wife to handle that task. I felt my upper lip curl and I forced it down. I needed to save my childish behavior for my mother.

"You know, Mother, if Jerry and I hadn't stayed friends through the years, he might have booked you on a whole list of offenses instead of just putting you away where you couldn't get into any more trouble."

Lucille's chin lifted another notch. "I'm not in trouble, missy. I haven't done a thing wrong. And he had no business nosing into my personal life. That's private and confidential. I don't have to tell him one damn thing about what went on between me and BigJohn."

"I'm afraid you do, Mother. Somebody killed your boyfriend. On purpose. He was murdered. That's a real bad thing. Understand?"

"Don't get smart with me, young lady. I know what happened. I'm not senile."

No, she surely wasn't, but I was definitely exhibiting some of the tell-tale symptoms. The all-night drive had done a fine job of convincing me that I was about twice as old as my forty-three years, and trying to keep up with Lucille had sent the age meter into triple digits. And it

certainly didn't help that the one who should be traumatized by the ordeal looked positively perky, if seriously cranky. I opted to diffuse both our moods with a foray back to the underlying cause of both our troubles. "So who do you think killed him?"

Lucille shrugged. "Probably that loony wife of his. She didn't want anything to do with him until he started going with me, and then here she comes a running back to town. She was just pea-green jealous of me, I tell you." She twisted a manicured acrylic nail into a curl of Frivolous Fawn. "I suppose anybody could understand why."

I suppose so.

Now, I had never seen BigJohn's wife, but there's no question that my mother is a very attractive woman. Kind of a cross between Rue McClanahan, Dolly Parton and Joan Collins. And she says exactly what's on her mind. "So you really think she'd be capable of such a thing?"

She shrugged again. "It wouldn't surprise me. She probably had as good a reason as any of them."

"Them?"

"Well, there were a whole bunch of people hot over BigJohn's recent doings."

I fluffed my shoulder-length hair off my neck to try to cool off, then tucked an auburn-tinted curl behind my ear. "Like who?"

Mother frowned. "Jolene, I do not know why you insist on poking your hair behind your ears. You've always been such a pretty girl, but you really should think about a little back-combing and some hair spray. Get some lift there on the top."

I gritted my teeth and did not say that the beehive went out several decades ago, and furthermore, I thought I looked pretty decent, thank you very much. I happen to have enough natural curl in my hair that, with the right cut, it kind of does its own thing and usually turns out okay. I do not, in any way, shape or form, need any more lift to my hair. In this climate, the humidity puffs it up and out in every direction.

"And I bought you that big old tray of cosmetics for Christmas, but you don't ever use them. Why, if you'd just wear a little lipstick..."

"I wear mascara," I said, realizing as I did that I'd let her drag me into a conversation I didn't want to have — ever. "Okay, Mother, you're right, I'd look much better if I permed and sprayed and painted, but I

don't, so let's get back to the point. Who all was upset over the mayor's activities?"

Lucille huffed and patted her own hair, probably wondering how she could have produced such a daughter. After another glare in my direction, she said, "Just about everybody in town was mad at him. Every single member of the city council, the mayor pro tem and a goodly number of citizens who had their water shut off in some snafu down at city hall, not to mention the secretary who had to answer all those irate calls. I'll tell you, I was so mad I could've choked the life right out of him with my bare hands over that. I didn't have a drop of water in my house for two whole days!"

I started to mention — again — that she shouldn't be spouting off her murderous thoughts regarding the dead mayor, but she was already ticking off other suspects.

"And then there's that Dee-Wayne Schuman. Why, he stood right up at a city council meeting and called BigJohn a son of a bitch, which he is, because he stopped all the house building out north of town on account of permits or something. He'd also been trying to push the city limits out around some houses to boost the tax rolls. And I never said he was a good mayor."

"Sounds like he's alienated just about everybody."

"What goes around, comes around, I always say. BigJohn wasn't nearly as smart as he looked."

Now there was a scary thought. BigJohn Bennett had been a decent-looking man, in a Lyndon Johnson sort of way, but he in no way resembled a Mensa candidate. Still, he'd been the hot catch of the senior crowd, which was most likely the reason my mother had hooked up with him in the first place. Showing her pals that she still "has it" never strays far from her mind. I shudder to think what she might have done if he hadn't wanted her. Lucille does not take rejection gracefully, trust me.

The thought jabbed at me again. I couldn't make myself believe that my mother would shoot her boyfriend, no matter how mad she got, but I couldn't short-circuit the nagging "what if" that kept looping through my mind. The fact of the matter was that Lucille wasn't acting entirely like herself, and she for darn sure wasn't distressed about the murder of a man she'd practically been living with. Her words. She'd made a fairly nice fuss about the sheriff, the jail and the abuse she'd

suffered, but it wasn't a classic Lucille performance. Furthermore, she hadn't said a single word in maybe three minutes. Really weird.

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, trying to get a hint of what was going on with her. Tears along with the silence I would have understood. In the normal scheme of things, a woman who had suddenly and violently lost a friend — much less a boyfriend — would have been crying by now. But she wasn't. She was just staring out the window at nothing. Her eyes were squinted against either the Texas sun or the workings inside her head. Unfortunately, I feared the latter. Feared it with good reason. I knew this woman. And I knew this place.

In Kickapoo, Texas, things could always get worse. And would. I had, after all, just washed the car.

