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Almost Home

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Chapter One

It started just outside of Angel Fire, followed her all the way through New Mexico into Texas where the inviting white snowflakes turned to foreboding bullets of sleet.

When Kellie Masterson turned off I-40 onto the county road that threaded through the main street of Jackson, Texas and then on to the deserted stretch of road leading home, the windshield wipers on her battered SUV could no longer keep up with the onslaught.

Another five miles. Almost there.

Almost home.

The further she drove the more the tiny Outback skidded along the glassy pavement. February 14th was too late in the year for sleet in Texas.

She'd checked the weather carefully before leaving Denver. The storm had taken everyone by surprise. Snow she could handle, ice was another danger entirely.

She slowed the SUV's speed to a crawl. At this time of the year, darkness descended quickly. Not another soul was in sight. Not the place to lose control.

It had been almost two years since Kellie spent her last night here in Jackson. She still couldn't think of that night and Davis' betrayal and not want to fall apart.

Memories, bitter and sweet, washed over her as she drove the familiar terrain. Her grandmother hadn't lived in the town in more than two years, the house she'd once cherished had sat abandoned all that time and yet it seemed as if nothing had really changed in those years except for Kellie herself.

She barely remembered the innocent woman she'd been when a childhood crush turned to love and the man she adored made all of her dreams seem possible just by asking her to marry him.

Kellie made another circle around the town square. She couldn't think about Davis now or she'd lose the tiny bit of courage she was clinging to, turn the car around, and head back to Denver. It didn't matter that she'd lost her teaching job two weeks earlier and had come close to being homeless. All those things would be a welcomed fate compared to facing Davis again. With any luck, she'd never have to see him.

Not much had changed on Main Street in her absence. The ice cream parlor had been replaced by a burger joint, the five and dime had long ago disappeared to be taken over by a video rental, and the dress shop Kellie had loved so much as a gangly teenager had been converted into a grocery store. For the most part, time stood still for Jackson.

Even though it was barely six o'clock, not a single soul roamed the sidewalks this Valentine's night. The nasty weather kept most people home and off the streets.

As sleet continued to pellet the windshield, the last of the town's businesses, a burned-out brick storefront that had once housed Stevens Hardware came into view.

Kellie left Jackson behind and turned down the blacktop ranch road leading to her grandmother's home.

She hadn't planned any of this. The house might not even be livable. The electricity had long ago been shut off along with other basic amenities. She'd simply been running away from her life in Denver. Clutching at the only lifeline available to her. The house her grandmother had left her.

A few miles outside of town, the blacktop road forked. To the left the Jackson Ranch and a past that had once seemed so promising...until she learned the truth. The heir to the throne, Davis Jackson's real reason for marrying her hadn't been love. He'd wanted the hundred acre prime piece of grazing property her grandmother owned. The cost, marriage

to Evelyn's granddaughter. Kellie had stumbled upon that truth by accident. After her grandmother passed away.

To the right the less traveled section of road turned to dirt. The county didn't maintain the piece much past the fork.

She'd cleared the first bend when the SUV's threadbare tires skidded on black ice covering the tiny bridge over Jackson Creek.

Kellie jerked the wheel hard to the left. The car spun out of control. Once, then twice before plunging headfirst down the steep embankment and into the frigid waters of Jackson Creek.

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Davis Jackson saw the taillights up ahead and wondered who in their right might had the nerve to venture out on a night such as this. Well, other than himself. He'd had no choice in the matter really.

No one lived down that part of the road any longer, not since Evelyn's passing and yet the vehicle didn't even pause at the fork in the road before turning right.

Whoever was in the vehicle had no idea that the road would be impassible by now.

The last thing Davis wanted to do tonight was chase after some lost soul. He was dead tired from helping Zeak and Carl search for the herd most of the afternoon in the thick brush of the back forty. He was exhausted, dirty and more than a little in need of a hot shower and yet his conscience wouldn't let him leave the driver to their own defenses.

Davis eased the truck around the curve in the road and slammed the brakes hard. Smoke drifted up from the creek. The car was nowhere in sight but it was easy to fit the pieces together.

He edged the truck closer to the bridge and hopped out. A small SUV had slid down the creek bank into the water. Smoke billowed from the hood as the murky waters closed in

around it. The vehicle had lodged itself against one of the large boulders. It hadn't washed down the creek, which wasn't a good thing.

Water seeped into the crevasses of the SUV at an alarming rate. He could see the driver, a woman, slumped over the steering wheel.

After several attempts at getting a signal on the phone, Davis finally gave up on reaching 911. He'd be on his own to rescue the woman.

His footsteps stumbled over the slippery terrain as he made his way slowly down the bank, managing with difficulty to keep his footing. When he reached the driver's side, he recognized her immediately.

He'd never forgotten the woman who stole his heart and tore it to pieces all the space of six short months. Kellie Masterson. His wife.

Kellie was here? What on earth was she doing out here on a night such as this?

Davis waded into the water, reaching for the door handle on the driver's side. It had jammed closed with the impact. He threw his full weight against it and somehow managed to pry it open. A rush of icy water almost swept him away in its flow. He gripped the door tight then felt for a pulse. It was there. Weak but at least she was alive.

Kellie groaned a pitiful sounding whimper as she regained consciousness. She struggled to open her eyes. In all the times he'd imagined her return, dreamed of it, longed for it, nothing prepared him for this. If this was an answer to prayer, God sure had a weird sense of humor.

Dear God, please let her be okay.

"Kellie, can you hear me? Kellie, it's Davis. Don't try to move until I'm sure you're okay. I'm going to get you out of here," Davis hoped to reassure her. "Everything is going to be okay."

Slowly she turned to look at him. There was no welcoming in her expression. Her brown eyes burned with hate. "Davis? What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

His jaw tightened at her expected reaction. She wasn't happy to see him. He wasn't surprised. Not after the way she'd ran away. Refused his calls. Wouldn't talk to him, and had all but insisted on a divorce he refused to grant her.

So many things had been left unsaid that needed fixing. He only hoped it wasn't too late.

His tone flattened at her response. He'd hoped...well it really didn't make much difference now. "Does it matter? I'm here now and I'm to get you out of here."

"The car--it skidded out of control. I didn't have time to hit the brakes." She fumbled with her seatbelt. "I can't get it to release. Davis, the car's filling up with water! I can't swim."

He knew this only too well. He'd tried a dozen times to teach her when she was a small child growing up, tagging around wherever he went. Kellie was terrified of water much deeper than a bathtub.

"It's okay I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He leaned closer, felt her tense away, then reached past her to work on the belt. It took several tries before the latch released.

He did a preliminary check of her limbs to make sure nothing was broken. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

She shook her head while keeping a nervous eye on the rising water. "I don't think so. Get me out of here, Davis."

He scooped her up in his arms and awkwardly climbed the embankment. Davis opened the passenger door and gently deposited her inside the warmth of the cab then climbed behind the wheel.

He studied her with concern. She was bruised and had God only knew what other types of injuries. He put the truck in reverse, edged off the bridge, then turned around.

"I'm taking you the hospital."

She jerked to face him ready to argue. "No! No hospital. I'm okay."

"You're not. Kelly, dammit, you don't know that for sure. You could have internal injuries."

"Davis, I'm not going to the hospital and that's it. Can you please just take me to my grandmother's house? I'll take care of the car tomorrow. I just want to go home."

He couldn't believe he'd heard her correctly. "You can't be serious. The house isn't livable, Kellie. The power's off, the roof's damaged in several spots. You can't stay there."

Tears of frustration gathered in her eyes. She turned away and drew a shaky breath. "I didn't know. I guess I just thought..." She shook her head. "Can you take me back to town then? I can stay at the Motel Six until I can take of the repairs and move into my grandmother's home," she added definitely as if daring him to argue.

Even though technically the house was hers, the land it sat on belonged to Davis. Evelyn had insisted it be that way, although Kellie refused to listen when he tried to explain her grandmother's wishes.

Now, all of the sudden, after two years, she wanted to move back into her grandmother's home? She'd come back for good. Back where she belonged. Back to him? He'd almost given up hope of that happening. But if she'd returned to Jackson, at least she wasn't three states and a thousand miles away. He had a chance. Today of all days, Valentine's Day, it felt like a sign.

Davis put the truck in drive, his decision final. Why Kellie had chosen to return to Jackson after all these years was another discussion meant for different time. For the moment, he'd do as she asked, but he wasn't taking her back to town. She'd come home with him.

Instead of heading straight for the city limits, he turned right onto the paved road leading to the Jackson Ranch. For the first time in two years, it felt as if he were finally going home.

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Kellie shifted uncomfortably in her seat, a sob catching in her throat. "Davis, no."

"Dammit, Kellie, yes. Let me help you. There's no way I'm taking you back into town and pretending this didn't happen for a reason. You're still my wife whether you want to be or not."

She glanced sideways at him. The anger and resentment was all still there. It reminded her of their last night together. She'd learned the truth about their marriage. What she should have realized all along. Why he'd chosen her of all people to marry. They'd argued. She'd told everything she suspected and he hadn't denied a single one of her accusations.

"Even if you don't want to be we're still married." The hard edge in his voice told her now was not the time to argue this point.

Besides, she couldn't think of one single thing to say. She *was* his wife. She loved him. He'd betrayed her. It didn't matter how sincere he sounded now it didn't change the facts. They couldn't rewrite history.

She turned away. She couldn't look at him and not remember all the times in their marriage where she'd loved him and trusted him, just as her grandmother had.

He hit the garage door opener and one of the two massive metal doors opened to reveal the dark cavernous void of the garage. The motion lights around the house one by one turned on illuminating both the outside of the house and inner darkness as the truck slid to a halt inside the garage.

Then he turned to face her again. Their eyes met. Tension seeped into every molecule of Kellie's body. Old feelings resurfaced. Ones she'd told herself she'd laid to rest. And old desires. Oh yes, they were still alive as well.

She'd never be free of Davis no matter how hard she tried to deny his importance in her past. Her future.

He blew out a frustrated sigh, got out of the truck, and opened her door. He didn't say a word as he lifted her into his arms.

Her nerves stretched to a breaking point with tension. She closed her eyes, wishing that he hadn't touched her. Hating her reaction to his touch.

He rambled up the stairs and shouldered his way through the side door that led into the kitchen. Everything still looked the same as it had two years earlier when she had the right to call this home.

They passed through the living room, with its enormous stone fireplace situated in the center of a wall of floor to ceiling windows. This room had once been her favorite with its startling, panoramic views of wide-open Texas fields.

Davis took the steps of the sweeping staircase two at a time leading to the next level of the house where several guest rooms sat. He was anxious to be rid of her.

The bedroom was as warm as the rest of the house as he dropped her on the bed, but he didn't leave.

He seemed incapable of moving.

"Davis." She hated the trembling sound in her voice.

"At least let me call Doctor Severn."

She closed her eyes. "No. I'll be fine. Please, just leave."

After another tense moment passed where she didn't dare look at him, he did as she asked. He crossed the room without another word and closed the door hard.

And finally, she could breathe again.

Chapter Two

Kellie awoke to the night closing in around her. Her bruised body ached with the simple effort of sitting up. Her eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness around her. Something had awakened her. A sound perhaps?

Outside the wind howled through the trees. The room at first was unfamiliar. It took only a moment to remember. She'd come home, no, not quite home. She was at Davis' ranch.

Her fingers groped for the light switch. Nothing happened. Kellie stumbled out into the blackness of the hallway, the wooden floor cold beneath her feet. She'd managed only to remove her shoes before falling asleep.

She stood frozen in place. It had been two years since she'd left this house. The layout of the hall was unfamiliar.

She turned in the direction of where she remembered the stairs. Her searching fingers collided with warm, familiar flesh beneath them. Davis. Startled, she couldn't stop the scream that ripped through her.

"Kellie, it's okay." Davis held her for a moment then lifted her unresisting body in his

arms and carried her down the stairs to the warmth of his study, where the fire blazed against the coldness of the night.

He put her down on the sofa close to the fire and knelt in front of her. Taking her cold hands in his he rubbed them together within the warmth of his own but his eyes never left hers and she could see very clearly the concern in the blue eyes that watched her closely.

This was the Davis she remembered. The one she'd once loved. She loved. Caring. Gentle. Five years her senior, he'd played the big brother part until she grew up and understood what she wanted from Davis wasn't a big brother.

Still handsome and sexy as hell, his dirty blond hair touched the collar of his shirt. His body hard and lean, the result of years of backbreaking labor on the ranch. Davis was not the type of man sit ideally by, secure in his wealth while others worked the land.

"I'm sorry I frightened you. The storm took the power out just before I heard you cry out. You were sleeping so peacefully earlier that I didn't want to wake you. Don't be afraid, everything is okay now. You're safe now Kellie."

She wished that were true. "Davis, I don't belong here. I can't stay."

He shook his head. "You can. It's up to you. Besides, you can't go anywhere until morning, the roads are all iced over." He looked into her eyes, his mesmerizing as ever. "I guess I have tonight to convince all those things you believe about me are wrong."

He still held her hands in his calloused ones. She could feel her doubts and resentments fading. She couldn't let him draw her into his spell once more.

"It's no use, Davis. We're two different people than we were back then and I know what you did. Why you married me. I know everything."

The gentleness in his eyes evaporated before her. In its place was the anger from their past. "You always were as stubborn as hell, refusing to see the truth if it didn't fit into your way of thinking." Davis tossed her hands away and got to his feet, his long legs

striding to the stone fireplace. He threw several logs on the fire with more vengeance than necessary.

Even after two years, she recognized the gesture. He needed space.

Slowly he turned back to her. "I loved you with all of my heart and I would have done anything – everything to keep you here, but I couldn't bear your distrust, Kellie. I still can't."

Through all their time apart, a little piece of her had always believed they'd work it out one day. She'd held onto that hope through all the long, lonely nights in Denver. The fear and uncertainty concerning her future.

Looking at Davis' somber expression, suddenly she couldn't find that hope in her heart any longer.

Her voice stumbled over his name. "Davis."

He hesitated for a second, then walked over to his desk, took something out then stood before her, no longer angry. He'd given up.

He tossed an envelope into her lap. "I'm breaking a promise I make to Evelyn by giving you that, but at this point..." He shook his head. His beautiful blue eyes distant.

"This is my last chance for redemption with you, Kellie. If you won't believe me, believe Evelyn. Believe your own grandmother."

Davis strode out of the room without another word.

She glanced down at the simple white envelope bearing the familiar handwriting of her grandmother. Davis' name was written across the front of it.

Kellie's fingers shook as she opened the envelope and took out the single piece of paper.

As her grandmother's words spilled across the page, tears blurred them from Kellie's eyes.

The letter was dated three months before her grandmother's death. Three months

after Davis' married Kellie.

Its contents were simple yet heartbreaking. Her grandmother was broke. Her house was being sold to pay off taxes. Grandma Evelyn had hated confessing her troubles to Davis. She hadn't wanted to take the money Davis offered her. She had too much pride. She was the one who insisted he buy the land because she wanted to keep it within their family.

Davis had married Kellie for all the reasons he'd claimed. Because he loved her.

She dropped the paper on the floor and covered her face. Dear God, what had she done? How could she have believed the worst about the man she'd promised to love forever?

Was it too late for them? Surely, the bleakness in Davis' eyes had hinted at as much.

She glanced at the clock on the mantle. Five minutes until midnight. Maybe it wasn't too late. It was still Valentine's Day after all. The time for love. Maybe she and Davis could find the love they once had for each other.

Kellie got to her feet and ran from the study. She searched each room but he wasn't there. In the living room, she found her first hint of where he might have vanished when she saw Davis' jacket missing from the coat rack next to the door.

She had no idea where her coat might be, but it didn't matter. She struggled to open the door against the howling north wind. She'd barely taken two steps off the porch when the biting cold pierced her through and freezing sleet mixed with snow pelted her face. *Snow?* In February in Texas. This had to be a sign.

She'd seen his truck still parked in the garage. He hadn't left. She raced to the closet barn, calling out his name above the raging storm. He wasn't there.

Then another far more crippling thought dropped her to her knees as she prayed like she hadn't done since she was a child.

In the worst possible conditions, at the most unexpected time, dear God, don't let

anything have happened to him. Please help me gain his forgiveness.

"Kellie?"

His voice had never sounded more like a gift before. She scrubbed the blinding tears from her eyes and got to her feet.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Davis! Thank God!" She ran to him and threw herself into his unsuspecting arms. After a fearful breath in time, he gathered her close. So close. He wasn't leaving anything to chance either.

For the longest time, neither said a word. They just held each other, forgetting the cold.

"Let's go inside. We need to talk," Davis whispered against her ear.

They did. They needed to talk. She knew this. She needed to apologize. That could wait. Right now, she just wanted to hold him tight and realize how lucky she was that fate had stepped in and forced her to let go of all of her foolish pride.

If she hadn't lost her job, she would never have found the most precious thing in the world. Her marriage. Her husband. The love she'd thought she'd lost forever.

The End

About the Author:

Mary Eason grew up in a small Texas town famous for, well not much of anything really. Being the baby of the family and quite a bit younger than her brothers and sister, Mary had plenty of time to entertain herself. Making up stories seem to come natural to her.

As a pre-teen, Mary discovered romance novels and knew instinctively that was what she wanted to do with her over-active imagination.

She wrote her first novel as a teen, (it's tucked away somewhere never to see the light of day), but never really pursued her writing career seriously until a few years later, when she wrote her first romantic comedy and was hooked.

Today, Mary still lives in Texas, and still writes about romance. In fact, she can't think of anything else she'd rather do.

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