

CHAPTER ONE

Til Death Do Us Part

Buck Blanton towered over me as we stood at the back of the church waiting for the music to begin. My arm looped through his, and I felt the massive muscles that seemed more like boulders than flesh and bone. The sheriff looked odd, duded up in a tux with a bolo tie. He peered down at me and gave me a wink with one of his deep black eyes. A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips. He leaned toward my ear and whispered in a gravelly voice, "You ready for this, Miss Madison?"

"Damn tootin'. Dixon Tucker is the second-best thing that ever happened to me. My daughter, of course, is in first place."

He nodded. "Wish Grant were here."

"Don't get me started, Buck." I took a deep breath. "Dad's death knocked the wind out of me. I don't want tears smearing my mascara before I get down this aisle."

He patted my hand with his huge dark paw. "You honored me by asking that I stand in for him." His eyes glistened. Buck had remained with my father and held his hand as he lay dying in a Mexican hospital. There was no one else I would rather ask to give me away at my wedding than the Sheriff of Burnet County. Their friendship had spanned the years of my lifetime. They fussed and cussed at each other from time to time and on one occasion discovered they were sharing the favors of the same woman. I think it shocked them both; they almost came to blows over the matter.

The woman in question was the Widow LouEllen Mueller. In her later years, she had developed a wicked reputation as an aggressive cougar. The younger the better. She walked a thin line between being scandalous and criminal. She's lucky. So far, parents hadn't charged her with rape of their child.

I don't know that Dad and Buck shared the details of their dalliances with the widow, but a few months after they became aware they were both dipping in the same honey pot, I noticed a jocular ease between them. I'm of the opinion that men can preen about their sexual exploits with a woman while females, on the other hand, are more inclined to be jealous as two screaming wildcats if they discover they've shared the same man.

Violin and harp music started our wedding with the beautiful "Ave Maria." Buck and I stepped forward. I floated down the aisle as the gentle musical piece drifted through the sanctuary. Magnolia Bluff friends turned their faces toward us and beamed their love and support. Harry Thurgood, owner of the Really Good Wood Fired Coffee Shop, and his wife the Reverend Ember Cole smiled. Harry gave us a subtle thumbs-up. Caroline McCluskey mouthed the word, "Wow." Standing in the pew in front of Caroline, a scowling Mary Lou Fight eyed me up and down with a measure of disdain on her lips. She hadn't been invited to the wedding; she just showed up. It was her not-so-subtle middle finger salute to me. The rich, wicked witch of Magnolia Bluff was a controlling, mean-spirited woman who was unanimously hated and feared by most of the residents of our

small Texas town. Her spiteful attitude etched deep-grooved wrinkles in her glowering face. I gave her an especially large smile. She frowned in reply.

My attention was drawn to the front pew when my daughter Anna screamed, "Mama, Mama!" She squirmed and wiggled in the arms of her nanny, Valeria Aguilar. I put a finger to my lips to hush her, but she clapped vigorously and continued to shout at me. I grinned from ear to ear and relaxed. Why shouldn't she be joyous today? I certainly was. The crowd giggled their approval of her performance. Anna was used to being the center of the universe. My dark-haired child with black ringlets that framed her face and huge brown eyes made her look like a kewpie doll.

I glanced from Anna to my handsome groom who sported a mile-wide grin. Dixon Theodore Tucker was not only the governor of the state of Texas, but more importantly, he was my man. This six-foot-three giant had swept me off my feet. Smart, sweet, honorable, and a by-God man's man. He enticed me with his subtle sexuality that oozed from his pores and sent my pheromones screaming. I simply couldn't wait to jump his bones. Texas produces men like Dix in spades, but he towers over them not only physically but mentally.

How did I, Madison Jackson, deserve this perfect man? I don't rightly know. I think I have always frightened men away. Most males are intimidated by a woman who wears a gun on her hip, can kick their feet out from underneath them, and put them on their back within seconds. I was known as buff and guns by some men in the community. I suppose they were referring to my toned body and no-nonsense attitude. But not by Dixon. As a confident, learned man, he is comfortable and gracious in most situations. He melts my aggressive side, and I thoroughly enjoy being his woman.

Buck and I approached the altar where Dixon and his best men were lined up on the right side. Father Lee Gorman stood in the center resplendent in a white silk chasuble decorated with two gold intertwined rings. I gave Father Lee a brief smile then turned to gaze into Dix's gray green eyes. The music stopped. Miraculously, Anna stopped screeching "Mama", and all the rustling hoopla behind me faded away.

At this moment, it felt as if Dixon and I were the only two people in the room. He leaned forward and whispered, "Here you are, my beloved. You look like an angel." I felt angelic in my long lace wedding gown with a trailing two-foot train. All I needed were a pair of wings.

Buck nodded to Dix and passed my hand over to my future husband. His grasp was gentle and warm; our fingers interlocked.

My college roommate and Maid of Honor, Suzanne Rock, stepped sideways to my left. I handed her my red and white rose bouquet. The long Catholic high mass began.

Dixon's eyes never left mine as we declared our consent to be married and repeated our vows to each other. A surge of joy overwhelmed me. Tears spilled down my face and tickled my lips. Dixon teared as well. He took his thumb and brushed away the moisture beneath my eyes.

Father Lee blessed our rings, and we slipped them on each other's fingers with ease. It was official. I was now Mrs. Dixon Theodore Tucker. I giggled my glee. Dixon gave me a quizzical side glance. I winked back at him.

Later, as we knelt for communion and I accepted the Body of Christ on my tongue, I prayed silently to my Savior, thanking him for the precious gifts he had given me. My heart overflowed with his sanctifying grace.

At the end of mass, Father Lee raised his arms and said, "Let us welcome for the very first time as husband-and-wife Dixon and Madison Tucker."

I looked over the congregation and noticed a stranger in the back who stepped into the aisle. Dressed in a black suit and fedora, he appeared to be Hispanic. His hat was pulled down to meet the oversized shades he wore. He reached inside his jacket pocket and withdrew a gun.

I didn't have time to yell a warning. A loud explosion ripped through the exuberant crowd. My chest caught the searing blast. I fell backward on the steps behind me and dragged Dixon with me. I watched a growing circle of blood stain the front of my wedding dress. The last thing I heard before slipping into unconsciousness was Anna screaming, "Mama! Mama!"

