
Chapter 1

Finding two police officers on her front doorstep was not the way Rachel expected to start the new year. “I knew I should have had my black-eyed peas for breakfast,” she said, and then chuckled, hoping to hide her nervousness.

One of the officers smiled, but the other one frowned and said, “Pardon me?”

“Black-eyed peas for luck,” she said. “You’re not from the south, are you?”

In lieu of answering he asked, “Are you Rachel Mixon?”

“I am,” she said. When they asked for ID, she invited them inside and went for her purse in the bedroom. Once they had confirmed she wasn’t lying about her identity the one who had smiled at her quip said, “Do you know an Agatha Bales?”

Rachel’s heart sank and tears stung her eyes because there was only one reason they would ask that question. She nodded, not trusting her voice.

“Do you know how to get hold of her next of kin?” The non-smiling officer pulled out a notebook and flipped it open. “Her nephew, Dexter Bales? We’ve tried to call him but we keep

getting voice mail. His DPS address shows he lives way out in Randall County. We wanted to see if you had a different number before we sent a deputy out there.”

Rachel wanted to ask how they knew to come to her for the information. She and Dex had not been a couple for years, but she still knew where to find him.

“Let me get my cell,” she said. She started toward the bedroom, where her phone rested on the table beside her bed. But before she left the room she said, “Is she gone?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the first officer said. “Her neighbor called in a welfare check. It seems they had coffee together every morning, and when she couldn’t raise Mrs. Bales, she called us.”

Rachel wanted to correct the Mrs. part. Agatha had never married. “And me?”

“The neighbor had a just in case letter,” the officer continued. “The first name on the list was Dexter Bales, and the second was yours.”

Rachel nodded, then retrieved her phone. She rattled off a number and the officers both nodded.

“That’s the one we have,” the smiling cop said. “Thank you for your help. We’re sorry for your loss.”

Rachel wiped away tears, but when they turned toward the door she said, “Wait, can I tell him? It would be better coming from me.”

The two men exchanged a look, and Rachel waited for them to say no, that it was against policy. Instead they both nodded.

“We need him to come to the PD today, since he is her next-of-kin, according to the letter she left. You’re listed as a friend.”

Rachel laughed softly. “I’ve known her all my life.” She wiped an errant tear. She was trying as hard as she could not to cry in front of these two men. “I’ll try to call Dex, and if I can’t get hold of him I’ll drive out to his farm.”

The first officer handed her a card. “Ask him to call us as soon as possible, and we’ll set up a time.”

She wanted to ask more, like how Aunt Agatha had died, or where her body was, but something told her they would not answer her questions.

“I’ll get to him as fast as I can,” she said.

When they were gone she sat down on the couch and put her face in her hands. She wanted so much to cry her eyes out, but she knew she didn’t have time. It would take her a little more than an hour to get to Dex’s house, and there was no telling if he was working in the fields, or out and about after having partied too much the night before. She didn’t see that happening, though. Dex had never been one to attend parties. He preferred quiet time at home.

She sniffled and wiped away her tears once more. Then she slapped her hands on her knees and stood. After she took a quick shower and dressed she headed out toward Canyon. The roads were pretty much devoid of traffic, and by the time she took the turn toward Hereford she realized it was going to take her far less time than she thought.

“Too many people sleeping off their champagne,” she said with a laugh. She took the turn toward Buffalo Lake and mentally practiced how she would tell Dex that his beloved aunt was dead.

Agatha had lived with Dex and his parents for as long as Rachel could remember. She took care of Dex while his parents worked, cooking and cleaning for the family. She was, despite appearances, a very strong woman, who was strong and stood her ground when people dared to cross her.

But she was gentle and sweet, too. She taught Rachel to knit, and crochet, and on nights when Rachel would stay with the Bales while her parents traveled for their work, Agatha would set up fun things for Rachel and Dexter to enjoy. They would have movie night, or read books, each of them taking a turn with the classics and then discussing the plot and characters.

Tears once again stung her eyes, and she wiped them away as

she drew closer to Buffalo Gap, Dex's farm. Two large steel buffalo were mounted on either side of the gate, which stood wide open. A smile lit her lips, the first one of the new year.

Dex grew many acres of wheat on his land, but he also bred horses and buffalo. It was his dream to have a whole herd of buffalo, and though she hadn't seen him in two years, she was sure he was making his way toward his goal.

Tears stung her eyes, not only for the loss of Aunt Agatha but for the demise of her relationship with Dex. How had they let things get so far away from them? They'd had plans, but those plans had never come to fruition. When her mother had asked what had happened, Rachel had just shaken her head and said, "I'm not really sure.

"You have to work at things, Rachel," her mother had said. "You can't just expect relationships to fall into place. They take time, and effort."

Rachel knew that, but it was impossible to talk about things with her mother. Patty Mixon always had to have the last word. Always.

Rachel drove through the gate and stopped the car. Her tears started to flow, and she put her head in her hands and let it happen. If she held back now she would more than likely fall apart when she told Dex about Agatha. And she was on a time schedule. The cops expected to hear from Dex as soon as possible. She needed to find him and impart her news. "Dex doesn't need to see you crying. He'll want to comfort you if he sees you sniveling like a baby. He's the one that needs comfort."

She sat up straighter and took several deep breaths, and then started back down the dirt road that led to the house. As she approached she saw several vehicles outside, two pickups and an SUV. It hadn't occurred to her that Dex wouldn't be by himself. What if he had a new girlfriend and she was inside the house with him?

That would be awkward. But as she parked next to a dark

blue truck, which she was sure belonged to Dex since it had a personalized plate that said, Buffalo-1. She had barely switched the car into park when a woman came running out of the house. She waved a towel in the air and said, "Hello, come on in!" Then she turned and ran back inside.

If Dex's new girlfriend knew who Rachel was, she wouldn't be offering a blank invitation. Still, there was nothing for it; Rachel had to talk to Dex. She could wait here until he came out, or she could go and knock on the door, or go inside like the woman had said.

"In for a penny," she said as she exited the car. She climbed the steps of the house, with its wide wrap around porch and knocked on the door.

"Come on in," the woman yelled above the classic rock music that filtered out of the house. "I'm in the kitchen, cooking up some cowboy caviar. We all need our black-eyed peas."

"Too late for that," Rachel whispered under her breath as she entered the house. She looked around and her stomach fell. It was obvious the woman lived here, for there would be no other reason for the house to be so neat, or smell so good. The aroma of the cowboy caviar, a mixture of peas, corn, jalapenos, avocados, and several other vegetables, filled the air.

"I'm looking for Dex," Rachel said.

"The man doesn't stay in one place long enough for anyone to find him," the woman said with a laugh. "He's out in the field with Tommy."

Tommy. Rachel should have known he would be here. He was Dex's best friend, and had been since their seventh-grade year when they fought over who would do the book report on the Alamo during Texas history class. They'd gotten into a fistfight, been locked in detention for two weeks, and had been best friends ever since.

"I'm Rachel," she said, watching the woman who was stirring the pot of beans.

“Really? Well, this ought to be interesting.” She pulled a phone from her pocket and hit a few buttons. “Hey, get up here. I’ve been cooking all morning and I won’t have it turn to mush while the two of you mess around in the dirt.” After she’d clicked off the phone she put it back in her pocket. But she still wouldn’t look at Rachel. And she still hadn’t given her name.

“Want something to drink?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” Rachel said. “If it’s all right with you I’m going to go sit in the living room and wait.”

“Okay.”

Since the woman’s reception had become decidedly chilly, Rachel did as she’d said she was going to. A large flat screen TV took up much of the wall, and she was tempted to pick up the remote and turn it on. She’d expected her task to be hard, but she didn’t expect to find the woman.

It hurt to think that Dex had found someone whom he was now obviously living with, even though it had been three years since they had split the sheets, as Aunt Agatha had once said.

Turning on the TV would give her something to concentrate on, something to take her mind off the fact that Dex and the woman in the kitchen did the nasty not very far from where Rachel now sat.

“If you plan on hurting him, you should just go now, and I won’t tell him you’re here,” the woman said.

Rachel looked at the doorway where the woman now stood. She hadn’t even heard her enter.

“It can’t be helped,” Rachel said.

“It can be.” The woman pointed at the door. “Just go.”

Rachel stood, but before she could say anything, the sound of a slamming door and male laughter filled the room. Rachel stared at the woman, and then Tommy called out, “Carrie, this is good.”

“You little bum!”

Carrie turned toward the kitchen, and Rachel stood rooted to

the spot. She waited a beat. She heard Carrie say, “That’s not for snacking, that’s for lunch. Put those bowls down, both of you. Dex, someone is here to see you.”

Rachel took that as her cue. She went to the kitchen and waited in the doorway. When she saw Dex, with a spoon halfway to his mouth, she couldn’t help but smile, even though she was about to break his heart.

“Rach?” His voice sounded hoarse, and she knew she should say something, offer some sort of greeting. But her voice stuck in her throat. “What are you doing here?”

“I... well... it’s Agatha.”

“Agatha sent you?” Dex put his spoon back in the bowl, then set the bowl on the counter. “Why?”

“No, Agatha, she’s... oh Dex, I’m so sorry.” Tears leaked from her eyes, and she swallowed hard to try and get hold of her emotions.

The shock on his face at seeing her changed to confusion, and then sudden comprehension. “No.”

“Yes,” she said. “The police came by my house this morning after they couldn’t get hold of you. She’d left some sort of list with her neighbor, first you, then me.”

“I just had dinner with her last night,” Dex said. “She can’t be dead.”

Rachel wasn’t sure how to react. Instead she reached into her pocket and drew out the policeman’s card. “They need you to call them, as soon as possible. They tried to call you.”

“I lost my phone,” he said. “I thought maybe it was at her house. I was going to call her later today.”

He woodenly moved to a chair at the table and fell into it. “It can’t be.”

“Dex, man, I’m so sorry,” Tommy said.

Carrie ran to him and threw her arms around his shoulders, hugging him tight. He didn’t move his arms to return the hug. Instead he just stared at the wall.

Rachel set the card on the table. "You need to call them." She could hear her voice break, and she turned toward the doorway.

"Don't go," Dex said. "I have questions."

"I have no answers," Rachel said. She turned to face him. "They didn't tell me much, just that her neighbor said she missed their morning coffee date." She paused a moment, and then she pulled out her phone. "Here, call them."

"Come on, Carrie." Rachel turned her head toward the other couple in the room. Tommy took the woman's hand and led her away. That was odd, to Rachel's way of thinking, but other things in the room deserved her attention. She turned back to Dex.

"It's locked." He held the phone out to her and she put in the code. She sat opposite from him as he identified himself. Then he said, with breaks in between the words, "Okay. Yes. I see. I agree. Okay. Okay. Thank you."

He clicked the phone off and put it on the table. "They think she died in her sleep. Since she was under a doctor's care for her heart condition, and her advanced age, the JP doesn't think there needs to be an autopsy."

Rachel jerked at the word, then crossed her arms over her chest.

"What happens next?" she asked, even though she knew it was probably not her business. Or was it?

"I have to go in and meet with the officers," he said. "I'm not sure after that."

A strained silence filled the room. This was one of those moments where she felt as if she should know exactly what to do, what to say. But her mind was as blank as a sheet of printer paper.

Finally after what seemed an eternity, she said, "I guess I should go."

"Don't," he said.

Not that she needed his directive. She hadn't made a move toward the doorway, even after she'd announced her intentions to leave.

Rachel took a tentative step toward him. He slumped forward in the chair and put his head in his hands. His shoulders moved ever so slightly, and she knew he was crying. And who could blame him? Agatha had lived with Dex and his parents for as long as Rachel could remember. When his parents had moved to Florida when Dex was twenty, Agatha had taken over as a parent, being there for everything that Dex needed.

She took another step, and then another until she was standing right in front of him. She reached her hand out in an effort to touch him, to try and take away his pain. But she pulled it back, wondering if he would welcome her touch.

Then from out of the blue he spread his legs, grabbed her by her waist and pulled her toward him. He put his head between her breasts as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. The slight movement of his shoulders was now almost like an earthquake, and his sobs filled the room.

Rachel kept one hand on his shoulder and another on his head, gently running her fingers through his hair. He didn't say a word, just continued to sob. She wanted to offer words of comfort, say something soothing, and probably stupid, like how Agatha had lived a long life and she'd loved him with all her heart. That wouldn't do any good, she knew. She'd heard those words from friends of her parents when her father had passed away when she was fifteen years old.

The only words of comfort she'd heard were from Agatha. The memory of it brought out the tears she'd been trying to hold back. She remembered that day as if it were yesterday. After the funeral she'd hid from everyone she could find, hiding not in her house but in the Bales' house next door, sitting in Dex's closet and crying her eyes out.

Agatha had sat on the floor just outside the closet's sliding

door. At first she hadn't said anything, just sitting there with her knitting in her hands, the needles clacking as Rachel had cried.

"It's okay to feel sad," Agatha had said after a while. "It takes time to adjust to the loss of a person you love."

Rachel had turned away from her and stared at the wall, with Dex's shoes and dirty jeans scattered around her.

"Allow yourself to mourn, and don't let anyone tell you the amount of time that you need," Agatha had said. "That is up to you. But there is one thing you can't do, and that is allow yourself to die with him. You are a vibrant, wonderful girl who will grow into a caring, wonderful woman. Everything that happens to you on your journey will mold you. It can make you better, or it can turn you bitter. Bitter is never good."

At the time, Rachel had listened, but she hadn't really thought Agatha knew how she was feeling. That realization came years later, when she'd learned that Agatha had lost her mother when she was barely ten years old.

Thinking about it now, she wished she had words of wisdom to impart to Dex.

"I have to call my parents," he said, when he finally quit crying, or at least she thought he had. He hadn't let go of her, and she had made no movement away from him. He seemed to still be sniffing a little. "Dad will want to know that his sister is dead."

"You should call them before you meet with the police," she said. "You might not have all the information they will want to know, but it will give them time to make travel arrangements. I'm sure your father is Agatha's executor."

"Actually I am," he said. "She wanted someone who lived near her."

"She wasn't that old, was she?" Rachel tried to take a step back, but Dex held her close.

"She was seven years older than Dad, and he's sixty-five now," Dex said. "She had heart troubles, you know."

“Yes, I had lunch with her once a week, and we talked about it.”

Dex’s hold on her loosened and he lifted his gaze up to hers. “You did? She never told me that.”

“We’d go for Thai food, either Wednesdays or Thursdays,” Rachel said. “She’d never let me pay. I told her once I was going to stop going if she didn’t let me treat once in a while. Her answer was a giggle and a promise that she would let me pay one day, but she never did. When I tried, she’d stare me down.”

Dex laughed. “I’m going to miss that stare. I had dinner with her once a week, too, usually Friday or Saturday night. She never let me pay, either.”

Rachel wanted to ask what Dex’s girlfriend thought about him having a standing date with his aunt on the weekend. Did she get angry about giving up a date night? Did Agatha like her? Agatha had never mentioned Carrie to Rachel. Rachel wished that she had, that at some point during their weekly dinners, Agatha had said, “Oh, by the way, Dex is dating someone.” And she could have added that she was comfortable in Dex’s house, that she cooked meals there and cleaned.

Maybe Agatha had not wanted to hurt her feelings.

“We didn’t eat Thai food,” Dex said. “We never ate at the same place. She wanted pizza, or Italian, or even Sushi. The few times I mentioned Thai food she told me it wasn’t her favorite.”

“Little liar,” Rachel said with a laugh.

“She knew how to play us,” Dex said. He finally let go of her and pushed the chair back. He went to the cabinet, took down a glass and filled it at the tap. He drank it in one fell swoop, and then refilled it. “You want something to drink? We have lemonade, beer, wine.”

“I have to drive back into town, so no alcohol. Maybe some lemonade.”

She watched as he poured her a glass. He set it on the table,

then walked to the back door. “This wasn’t the way I expected this year to start.”

“Me, either,” she said.

There was a silence, and then he sighed. “Let’s eat a big bowl of caviar, and then I’ll call my parents. I feel like I need alcohol before I call my dad, but I also think it wouldn’t be a good thing to see the cops half-drunk.”

Rachel looked around the kitchen. She remembered this place very well from when she and Dex were dating. She went to the cabinet and took down two bowls. After she filled them at the stove, she put a spoon in each one and set them on the table.

While they ate their caviar he said, “Come with me to see my parents.”

His words shocked her. She had to admit she wanted to. She wanted to support him, and, truthfully, she wanted to do it for Agatha, too. Agatha had always been there for her. Rachel knew she should be there for Agatha’s final chapter.

“Okay,” she said. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask how Carrie would feel about Rachel going with him, or if he should ask his current girlfriend to go. But then she decided she wasn’t going to question him. She wanted to be with him at this time.

“Call your parents,” she said. “Then get dressed and we’ll go.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, with a mock salute. He took a step away from the door, and then said, “I don’t have my phone. And I don’t have a landline anymore.”

She handed him her phone, and then said, “Where do you think you lost your phone?”

“Not sure,” he said. “We ate dinner out, and then I came home. I’ll call the restaurant later and see if it’s there. In the meantime we need to get cracking. I told Officer Sterling we’d be there by three.”

Sterling. So that was his name, or one of them anyway. She

hadn't even asked, she'd been so thrown off guard by him showing up on her doorstep.

After she unlocked the phone, she watched Dex punch in a number.

"I'm shocked you remember your parents' number," she said. "I have to just hit a name to call someone."

He just laughed. "I'm old school in some ways, you know that."

Yes, she did know that, and some of the ways that he was old school made her shiver with the memory.

He had moved into the other room, and she heard him greet his father and say, "The new year hasn't started out so good, Dad."

That, Rachel thought, was an understatement.