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THORNTON  
BROTHERS  
COLLECTION

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CAROLYN FAULKNER



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A.J.'s Hope

THORNTON BROTHERS - BOOK ONE

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## Prologue

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Two years earlier . . .

**H**is hands slid down the insides of her raised arms as she shimmied out of her smudged t-shirt. They'd spent the afternoon out on the range surveying his land on horseback—land that would soon be theirs—and now they were cleaning up before indulging in the homemade beef and vegetable stew she'd put in the crock pot before they'd left the house.

It was one of those rarest of times when, by a fortunate fluke, they had the house to themselves. Everyone else that was usually milling about the place either were at their own places, working, or out with friends.

A.J. grabbed her hands and put them on his hard, bare chest, tracing her hands with one still somewhat smudged finger. A large, marquis cut sapphire, sandwiched by two large diamonds, was nestled on the ring finger of her right hand. Her left hand sported her engagement ring, a small, badly cut and seriously flawed quarter karat diamond that his father had given his

mother all those years ago. One ring was old, one new, one for show and one for symbolism.

If she hadn't captured his heart so completely, if he hadn't spent all those years waiting and aching for her to grow up, and then waiting for the right time for them to come together, she would have possessed the just for show ring alone. But this woman meant more to him than any woman, ever. She deserved everything he could give her, including every scrap of himself. He'd dated occasionally, but he'd always known, somehow, that this woman belonged to him and that, when everything aligned correctly, she would be his.

She stood before him in a pretty lavender and lace bra that barely concealed her wonderfully ripened mounds. A.J. snaked his arms around her waist, contracting them ever so gently, so that she settled carefully against him. He knew there was no way she could mistake the bulge she most surely felt against her yielding tummy as anything other than what it was—a tribute to his rampant, everlasting desire for her.

There had never been any other woman—past, present, or future—for him and now she was his.

One big hand came up to cup her jaw and tip it up. His soft lips descended like a springtime rain, melding into hers—no rough demands or nervous fumbling for him. That wasn't his style in general, and certainly not with her.

No, their lovemaking tended much more towards the very long and the very slow, each touch trembling with anticipation. He'd known all his life that they would be dynamite when they got together. She excited him like no other woman ever had or could, and he intended to prove that to her every night for the next hundred years or so.

A.J. maneuvered them carefully over to the corner of the bedroom where he proceeded to open his closet door, revealing a full-length mirror. He slipped behind her and brought one big splayed, brown hand to rest on her flat tummy in marked

contrast to her pale, creamy skin. He pressed her back very slowly and ever so gently so that she was plastered against him, her backside to his front. Ten pink toes peeped out from under the boot cut jeans that pooled at her feet an instant later. Hope kicked them away impatiently and moved back to stand against him in just her matching bra and demure bikini briefs. A.J. spread his legs so that hers were between them, shortening just a bit, so that her head now just barely reached his shoulders.

"I love you," he whispered against the back of her neck. His lips slid over that soft, delicate flesh and he felt her shiver in his arms in a way that made him never want to stop. He nipped her softly there, just enough for her to know that he wasn't quite as tame as she might think; a stallion signaling to his mare that the end was inevitable, but he was willing to go slowly.

The paw that had spread itself naturally over her tummy glided carefully over that small expanse. His pinky got caught just under the waist of her panties, not forcing things, just dipping there a little, foreshadowing a bit, laying gentle claim to as much of the interesting territory as he could. Her breasts were damned near perfect. That sensitive hand began to journey upward to the pale lilac covered flesh that enticed him so.

This was not the first time they had made love, and it sure enough wasn't the last, but for him, it always felt new. A.J. couldn't imagine ever becoming jaded about what this woman gave him, what she surrendered to him each and every time they came together like this. It was more than her body and her mind and her pleasure. She gave him her soul, as he gave her his.

Nothing and no one had ever been as perfect for him, and nothing and no one ever would be.

Hope had tried—once—to convince him that her thighs were lumpy with cellulite, her right breast was just slightly larger than her left, and that her skin was splotchy and unbecoming without makeup, which he'd required that she relieve herself of before they began to make love.

With no warning what so ever, he had flipped her over on to her tummy on his custom king sized bed where they had been lazily basking in the afterglow. He placed his big right hand over almost all of her well-rounded bottom, and told her in no uncertain terms that those were spanking words. If she continued to run herself down like that, he would spank her bottom until she couldn't sit comfortably for a week. He'd better never hear her saying anything like that about herself again, or she'd find herself in exactly the same position, each and every time.

Hope couldn't have been any more surprised if he had confessed to her that he preferred the company of men. She'd known A.J. all her life, and she would have bet her life that he would never have raised his hand to a woman in any situation. A spanking? She wasn't six years old!

But what alarmed her the most about his threat was the fact that it caused a distinct tingle where she really didn't want it to. Their lovemaking so far had been absolutely unbelievable, and she wondered if her disturbing response might have been a result of that; she was so attuned to him and so sensitive to him that her body would respond to anything he suggested. She dismissed the thought. Despite her lifelong craving for him that had only worsened since they'd given in to their desires, she wasn't about to let him lead her down the road into some sort of strange fetish or kink—that just wasn't going to happen.

She hoped.

Now, several months later, he hadn't repeated his threat about spanking her, and watching herself in a mirror with him like this was just about as kinky as she wanted to get. As those huge hands molded themselves to her lace covered breasts, she couldn't help but arch her back, pressing them even more firmly into his palms, desperately wishing there was no material between her sensitive flesh and his calloused palms.

He was everything she'd ever wanted physically—a heavily muscled six foot four man with the trademark Thornton shock



of hair, black in his case, with sharply focused vivid blue eyes and a face that was anything but handsome. But that didn't matter. Her A.J. was more of a man than any ten men put together—any ten men that weren't his brothers, anyway—and everything about him, from his purposeful stride to his broad as a barn shoulders, screamed his confidence in himself and his manhood. A.J. had never needed to chase women; more than enough of them had chased after him since he'd hit puberty, because every pore he had fairly oozed with quiet, authoritative masculinity.

No wonder she'd been in love with him since before she could remember.

He pressed his lips to the side of her neck and whispered huskily, "I think this bra has got to go, darlin'." Her entire body shuddered convulsively. That voice scraped slowly along her already fevered skin. It was very deep and permanently slightly hoarse, the result of getting caught in the throat by the hoof of a very unhappy bull when he was in his teens.

Hope certainly wasn't going to complain about it. He had a bedroom voice to go along with his bedroom eyes. Even the most run of the mill comments were enough to make her nipples peak, as if they already were within his gentle grasp.

He dispensed with her bra easily, letting it fall to the floor in a heap beside them while his hands returned to much more intriguing territory. Hope had always thought that her breasts were too large, but A.J. was working on disabusing her of that notion too. His hands were just big enough to cup them perfectly, which he did, very careful not to massage too hard as he knew that her breasts were exquisitely sensitive. But those insistent nipples poked into his calloused palms, begging for the agonizing attention of his strong fingers that he was only too willing to provide.

As his fingertips and thumbs claimed those impudent points of hers and squeezed carefully but firmly, Hope's long, guttural

moan settled unerringly in his groin, making him answer her moan with one of his own.

She couldn't be still when he did this; she simply couldn't. His hands on her—in any way—inspired in her a need to move compulsively. Hope could no more suppress it than she could stop the sun from rising tomorrow morning. Her hips began to move slowly, rhythmically, and no amount of trying could suppress the impulse as her bikini briefed bottom worked back and forth over the answering ridge in his pants. The fact that she could excite him like this suffused her with heat, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

A.J. wasn't usually an overly demonstrative man. He didn't fawn all over her or have to constantly be touching her, like some of the few men she'd dated. He had too much confidence in himself and in her for that. There wasn't an insecure bone in his body.

When they made love, he was so romantic, attentive and focused on her that she could barely stand it. His eyes drank her in almost as avidly as her own feasted on him. Every touch, every kiss and every caress brought her that much closer to a screaming, frenzied end. The heat burst into her body every time she saw him, even in the most tame of situations like when his hand brushed hers at the dinner table, or they were just sitting together on the couch watching "CSI". Since they'd come together as a couple, Hope had lived her life on the edge of ecstasy, and even just a small smile from him across the room could make her whole body contract with an almost painful awareness.

She looked down and watched the way he handled her so carefully, knowing the incredible power contained within his hands and arms. He was the biggest, strongest man she knew, and yet she had never felt any way but completely safe in his embrace.

A.J. knew he wasn't going to be able to last very long if she kept dancing those curvaceous pillows against him. He squatted

down quickly, taking her panties with him, and lifting her into his arms as he rose. He carried her to his big bed, which had begun to be almost unbearably lonely on those long nights when she elected to stay at her apartment.

But he didn't want to think about that right now. He wanted to revel in everything about her. His senses were nearly exploding. Her light, flowery scent filled his head as he dipped it between her full breasts to kiss her sternum. He gathered those beautiful mounds against his cheeks, adoring the feel of them as they nearly overflowed his palms. He reared back to catch her all over arch as his fingers, rolling and pinching with gentle firmness, found those sensitive nipples again.

She appealed to him on every possible level, and he had to smack himself upside the head some times in order to realize that she was truly his to touch in this intimate, reverent manner.

"Please, A.J. Please!" It seemed all she could say, the only words her pleasure-muddled mind could get out.

He was of a mind to draw it out, to make her blush all over as she always did when he made her tell him exactly what she wanted. But it was too raw, and he was too embarrassingly close to his own end to delay things any longer than he absolutely had to.

A.J. reached down only enough to adjust himself out of the confinement of his jeans and underwear and then settled himself back between her legs, nestling his rigid length against the home it sought between her legs.

Hope let her hands wander over his bulging chest. She didn't know why, but being naked beneath him while he was still only undressed enough to complete their connection, somehow made her ache just that much more, almost to an unbearable point. It made her feel just the slightest bit submissive and helpless against him, as if she was being taken instead of being made love to, and that thought both drove her crazy and made her a little angry in the back of her mind.

But the crazy part won out hands down as he pressed himself inexorably inside her. She thought she would never get over how big he was. Her body clung to him with no direction from her, almost as if it was trying to deny him access, which was the last thing she wanted. She needed him to complete her. She needed to be filled to overflowing with him as she always was; it was the only way she could meet her own end and shatter around him with a scream that would leave her hoarse for days afterwards.

He didn't disappoint her in the least; he rode her relentlessly, but with such a tender, careful edge that she could barely stand it. She whimpered and writhed beneath him like a mindless creature and was bent on just one thought, one inevitable conclusion that he brought her to without mercy. He watched her every second of the way, gauging himself and his reactions—his very plunges and retreats—to her mewls and arches.

When they finally collapsed on top of each other after a much longer time than she would have guessed she could have lasted before exploding into pieces all around him—not that he'd given her any choice about it—he'd rolled slightly to her right, keeping one big hand's claim on her hip, and nuzzled her shoulder, as if he couldn't stand for them to be apart in the least.

"You're going to kill me, you know. We're too damned good together, and I'm too old for you."

"Want some Geritol, Grampa?" Hope asked dryly, surprised her brain could summon sarcasm when it felt like he'd dissolved her into pudding.

"No, but Viagra might not be too off." A.J. admitted humbly.

Hope snorted. "Puh-leeze. If you were on Viagra, you'd kill me. I can barely keep up with you as it is, old man." She ran her hand lazily from his wrist to his thickly muscled shoulder. "Besides, it ain't that you're older than I am that's the problem. It's that I'm so damned ugly."

A.J. didn't even think. Even as exhausted as he was—as he was likely to be for some time—it only took him a mere flick of those

big fingers to grasp her hip and turn it, bringing her onto her tummy gently. He silently marveled at the gorgeous line of her back and bottom, almost reluctant to do what he knew he had to.

Before she realized what he was going to do, he reached up and gathered her wrists together in his left hand, slowly, so as not to arouse her suspicions. He knew she was going to want to kill him long before he was through doing what he knew he needed to do for her.

A.J. was not going to tolerate his intended or his wife running herself down like that—not in private, not in public. Not at all, even within the confines of her own mind. She would find herself in this exact position time and time again if he ever got wind of anything coming out of her mouth that even slightly resembled a putdown aimed at herself. He just wouldn't allow it—not when he loved her to distraction and saw what a wonderful person she was. She gave so much—gave of herself until it hurt—to everyone she knew, was funny, bright and warm and, no matter what she thought or said, sexy as hell and pretty to boot.

A.J. took a deep breath, looking at the way his hand covered nearly every inch of that generous white bottom of hers. He would much have preferred to just give her a back rub, or maybe lick his way over every inch of her as he had when they had first come together intimately, but instead he was going to have to spank her—hurt her and make her cry.

And it wasn't easy. It especially wasn't easy because he'd never talked to her about this, never really put forth the idea that he had always subscribed to what most people would consider to be a less than enlightened view of marriage and close relationships between men and women.

He'd always wanted to be married. He'd always wanted a marriage like his parents' where his father was the undisputed—benevolent, yes, but undisputed nonetheless—head of the family. Not that his beautiful mother had ever kowtowed to him in the least, but there had never been any of the screaming matches

he'd heard at friends' houses, where the children had had to cringe in a closet to get away from the sounds of their parents verbally tearing at each other.

His father had never had to raise his voice at anyone—much less his kids or his wife. He didn't need to. All he'd had to do was say his wife's name, in that deadly calm, almost whisper of a deep voice. And the next morning, they would have worked it out. He came to know, once he'd grown up some, that part of “working it out” was his mother's submission to his father's discipline. There had never been any sign of any sort of abuse, no black eyes to hide, no broken bones; he couldn't imagine his father ever, ever raising his fist to hurt his mother in any way. The man was too completely devoted to her and his family to ever do anything like that. They were so excruciatingly happy together it was sometimes hard to look at them when they were making calves' eyes at each other, which they had done to their dying days.

And now he was going to continue that tradition—that solid base of happiness and love and respect—with the woman who would be his own wife.

Hope's indignant shriek at his first swat should have been his first clue that she was not going to accept this easily. She didn't know what he was trying to do. She had been basking in the afterglow, not quite in her right mind yet, when he'd turned her onto her stomach. She'd been hoping for a lovely massage, as he'd done for her before. Even when he'd taken her wrists in his hand, she hadn't worried.

But that first swat had caught her by surprise with its mere existence, as well as its pain. It wasn't a playful boyfriend smack and she couldn't really even claim that she didn't expect it. It wasn't as if he hadn't warned her several times exactly what he would do if she continued to insult herself in his presence. In the back of her mind though, she had been quite sure that he could never, would never, touch a woman in a painful manner.

And this most certainly qualified as a painful manner—an extremely painful manner—especially since he continued to deliver crisp, sharp swats, one after the other, without pause, to her rapidly reddening rear.

No amount of wiggling or writhing or kicking her feet up seemed to help either. As soon as she'd started launching her feet back towards her rear, he'd placed a long, heavy leg diagonally across them and the weight of it was enough to still her every effort to block the God awful spanks he was raining down onto her poor, quickly roasted rump.

“Stop it! Now! A.J.! Cut it out!” She could barely get coherent words out while he was blistering her butt like this.

But A.J. was resolute. “I’ve told you before what would happen if you kept saying things like that about yourself. I told you that first time we made love. I should have taken you over my knee then, but I didn’t. I wanted you too much, and I let my libido override what I knew you needed. But then you called yourself ugly again, and I won’t stand for it; I just won’t. You’re going to get a good, thorough spanking every time I hear you say anything like that about yourself.”

He continued to spank so long and hard that Hope was certain that she was going to go crazy from it. He continued until she was a limp, ragged doll. Her face was wet with angry tears. Her eyes were swollen and she knew that she was looking more ugly than she’d ever looked in her life.

When he finally stopped, she rocketed off the bed as if he’d shot her out of a cannon. She slipped into her panties and then rummaged through the drawer she’d occupied in his room for a pair of shorts that would go easier on her still burning bottom. After stepping into them, she caught the sparkle of his rings on her fingers and very quietly took them off without so much as a word to him. Not trying to hide the movement from him, she did it with no fanfare, no discussion and no real thought.

She wouldn't be engaged—much less married—to a man who could abuse her like that. She just wouldn't.

Hope ignored him as he trailed after her. He had kicked off his jeans afterwards, and now was trying awkwardly to drag them up his legs as she walked out the bedroom door. She was already at her car before he was able to catch up with her. He tugged her arm back and turned her towards him.

“What's the meaning of this?” He held out his hand, where the rings were nestled in his palm, looking small and defenseless, which was exactly how she felt too.

Hope refused to look at him. “I thought my meaning would be clear. But perhaps not, to a man like you. We are officially unengaged.”

As much as he wanted to go the caveman route, drag her back up to his bedroom, hold her and talk to her about why he'd done what he'd done, he instead stepped back and let her go. If she didn't want to be here, if she didn't want to marry him or even be around him, he certainly wasn't going to force her to do so.

She'd come to regret what she'd done and come crying back to him. Then he'd smooth things over with her.

He was sure of it.

She'd come back to him.

She had to.



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## Chapter 1

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If there was anything Hope Granger hated, it was middle of the night phone calls. They were never a harbinger of anything good. It was never a “we just had a baby aren’t you happy for us call”, or even an “I’m bugging you because I’m drunk as a skunk yet still know how to work my cell phone.”

The phone blared again from her nightstand while she tried to bury her face in her pillow and ignore it. She knew that it was a futile effort since that particular ring tone indicated that it was someone other than a bill collector. It was someone who knew her, and yet was willing to risk life and limb by calling her at—she glanced at her clock then wished violently that she hadn’t—two twenty-seven in the morning.

Finally giving in to the inevitable, she slapped her hand down in what she hoped was the vicinity of the phone cradle. She didn’t want to have to open her eyes again for at least another five or so hours. She made a lucky guess and was able to grab the phone and punch talk before it went to her answering machine.

“This had better be good.” The threatening voice she intended didn’t quite translate since it was delivered at barely

above a whisper, which was all the force she could summon at that ungodly hour.

She knew who it was by the telltale snort. "Is that any way to answer the phone?"

"Between the lines, Beauregard, between the lines," she growled in reply. "If you'd call at a decent hour, you'd've gotten a decent greeting."

"If I could have called earlier, I would have, believe me."

Hope heard his utter exhaustion and was instantly more awake. "He's not getting any better, is he?" She said the words slowly as if wanting to put off the answer she expected as long as she could.

Beau sighed sadly. "The truth is, Hope, he's getting worse. He just sits there all day in his room, wasting away. He refuses to go to physical therapy and he's barely eating. He's the worse patient you've ever seen."

Hope could well imagine the truth of that statement.

"He threw his lunch at one nurse, and she was the lucky one. We've gone through five nurses in the past three weeks, and even Etta's about ready to add him to tomorrow's dinner, no questions asked. I'm not willing to throw anyone else to the lion—"

She knew where this was going and finished his sentence for him. "Except me. You're perfectly willing to sacrifice me."

Beau had the grace not to make any further comment. He had no illusions. She'd known what he was calling for as soon as she recognized his voice.

It was her turn to sigh heavily. She didn't want to go back there. She didn't.

But it was A.J., and she would have clawed her way out of her own grave to help this man, even though he was her ex-fiancé. She knew though, that to say that he most certainly wasn't going to welcome anyone's assistance, especially hers, was an understatement that bordered on the ridiculous. She probably wasn't going to fair anywhere near as well as those nurses had

because A.J. knew all her weak points, and hurt and sick as he was, he wasn't likely to pull any of his punches.

She snorted softly to herself; as if he ever had before the accident. That was partly why they weren't together any longer. If he'd been able to keep his palm to himself and not feel compelled to spank her with it, she'd be there right now.

"Hope?" Beau was beginning to worry at her extended silence. She was his last possible refuge. The idea of losing A.J. by default was not an option. If he had to, he'd come up there and kidnap her, but he would rather she came voluntarily. He knew that this wasn't going to be easy for either of them. It was his hope that the sparks that usually flew between this woman and his older brother might bring him back to life.

He flatly refused to consider the alternative, that A.J. couldn't be reached and would just waste away in his wheelchair, looking out on the ranch that used to be his life's blood.

"Yeah. Yes, of course I'll be there," she answered, the butterflies—make that pterodactyls—already beginning to flutter around in her stomach.

She'd be seeing him again and be in the same room with him, in just a few hours. Her whole body clenched at the thought. He'd always been able to do that to her and, sometimes when she was alone in the night, reaching for him, wanting his arms around her in the night, she even let herself miss it. But not often, or she'd end up drowning in her own sorrows.

"There'll be a ticket waiting for you at the American counter."

"You don't have to ... "

"Hope," he growled, sounding depressingly like his brother. "Don't argue. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that you're coming."

"You Thorntons are all alike," she said, stretching slightly. "Bossy. Autocratic. Dictatorial."

"And?"

This time, her sigh was one of resignation. “Just checking that nothing had changed in the past eighteen or so months.”

“Twenty months, six days, twelve hours and thirty-two minutes since you left.”

“Why, Beau, I didn’t know you cared!” Hope teased.

His response was growled, “I care because I, we all, got stuck dealing with him once you left! And it’s a thousand times worse now, let me tell you.”

She knew he was dead right. Hope couldn’t imagine what A.J. was like once she’d left him. Well, she could, but she certainly didn’t like to. “I’m sorry about that, Beau, but—”

He knew she was about to apologize to him for the umpteenth time since she’d gone. “It’s okay. I understand that you had to leave for some mysterious reason, and I’m trying to accept it. But we need you back.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” she whined.

“Good.” She could hear him yawning in the background. “Now comes the hard part.”

His yawn, of course, had inspired one of her own. “What now?”

His reluctance to tell her was almost comical. “Well,” he drawled, “I got you on the first available flight—”

Hope’s eyes flew open as she realized what he was saying. “Don’t tell me! Don’t tell me!”

“And it leaves at six-thirty.”

She hissed air in through tightly clenched teeth. “Argh! You are such a sadist!”

Of course, he had to rub it in. “That’s in the morning, in case you didn’t realize it. This morning, approximately, what, four hours from now for you?”

“I’m hanging up now.”

Beau chuckled and said, “By the way, pack heavy. I don’t think that this is going to be a short visit.”

Hope groaned into the phone. “Just how I wanted to spend

my summer vacation—nursing a man who's cranky at the best of times.”

“He needs you, Hope.”

The bald truth of his statement shone through in his voice, and it automatically made Hope's throat clench. “I know. Who else would I get up for— Holy moly, I'm going to have to be up and dressed by—”

She was starting to growl, so Beau decided to cut his losses quickly, before she had a chance to finish that thought. “Bye, Hope! Thank you!”

He hung up the phone just as she started to foam at the mouth and sat there staring at it for several long moments. He hoped she could help. If he hadn't been absolutely desperate, he wouldn't have called her.

But, beyond the more dire aspects, it might perhaps be a way for Hope and A.J. to get back together. Sometimes a trauma pulled a couple closer. A.J. had never really told his brothers much about why, all of a sudden, he was disengaged to a woman who had appeared to be the love of his life, and they hadn't wanted to pry. They certainly were curious, although none of them wanted to brave his wrath and question him too closely about it. A.J. had walked around the house like a keg of dynamite, ready and all too willing to explode at the least instigation.

Hell, Beau realized, A.J. would still be walking around that way, if he could.

He dragged a calloused hand over his face and realized all of a sudden how tired he was. A.J. at his best wasn't easy to deal with. But since the break up with Hope and then his accident, he'd been downright impossible, and the brothers were at the end of their collective ropes.

He stood and walked to the door of A.J.'s den, flipping off the light with a slap of his big paw, taking out his frustrations on the switch.

If Hope couldn't help, he didn't know what they were going to do.

SHE DIDN'T GET MUCH MORE sleep that night; her mind was too busy creating list upon list, which she knew from past experience would evaporate completely by morning if she didn't turn on the light and write everything down on the pad of paper she kept on her nightstand.

But, of course, she was dead asleep by the time the alarm went off, barely two hours later. The urge to throw it across the room was very strong, but she resisted. Half sleepwalking, she managed to get everything together in record time—for her—and got on the plane without incident.

It was a relatively short, uneventful flight, and she slumped her way into San Antonio International Airport dragging the absolute limit of carry-on items, all bursting at the seams. She let herself be funneled towards baggage, lazily scanning the crowd for a Thornton brother or two, depending on who could get away from their jobs or the ranch.

The trio was damned hard to miss. There was a particular look in that testosterone filled family; they all had it, easy confidence, but with the muscle and the will to back it up, any time, any way necessary. And they were all trees, all of them. She'd always felt like a dwarf in their company, because most of them topped her five feet five inches by nearly a foot. They had hung to the back until they'd spotted her, then moved forward with the power and strength of an Army tank, parting the sea of people that separated them from their goal. They swept her up in their collective arms as soon as they reached her, lifting her entirely off her feet and passing her around like she was a sack of potatoes.

She'd forgotten how wonderful it was to be surrounded by that impenetrable wall of beefcake. They squeezed her until she thought she'd pop, and Hope loving every single minute of it,

tried desperately to return the hugs with the same fervor, if not strength.

But when they started passing her back for a second round, she ordered, "Put me down before one of you oafs cracks my ribs!"

It was Dunn who had her then, the second to the youngest of the very fearsome fivesome, and, contrary to the usual reaction a Thornton had to an order, he set her down very gently in front of them. To her horror, her eyes had filled with tears and they overflowed down her cheeks at the mere sight of them. She didn't think she'd ever had such a feeling of homecoming as she had then with them standing there like idiots blocking the way to baggage.

Each of them wanted to keep a hand on her, as if they thought she'd disappear if they didn't, and they all guided her down to claim her bags. The youngest, Eric, waived her firmly away from the carousel, telling her in the usual domineering Thornton manner to just point at what bag was hers. Since Dunn and Cade were already each holding an arm to prevent her from picking it up herself, she glared and sighed—to no avail—and dutifully pointed. When she had what meager belongings she could remember to cram into her one and only suitcase, they all tromped out to the waiting SUV, boldly emblazoned with the familiar Circle T logo.

"Here's where I get off." Dunn turned and hugged her tight. He had a law practice and no longer lived at the ranch, not that he was any less close to his brothers because of it. "I'll see you tonight. It's going to be all right, now that you're back," he whispered hoarsely, putting voice to the fervent wish of all the brothers.

Hope's eyebrows rose, but she didn't say anything as she hugged him back and he left to go to his own car, which, knowing Dunn, was most certainly not an SUV.

Cade was the next to defect, and although she knew they

both had jobs to get back to, Hope couldn't quite keep from feeling somewhat abandoned.

"I'm so glad you're back." Cade caught her eyes before squeezing her until she squeaked, literally.

Somewhere along the line, Hope could see that she would need to remind these lovely gentlemen that she wasn't "back." She was here, but it was far from permanent. She'd do anything she could to help A.J. recover, although Hope was nowhere near as confident about her abilities as the brothers were. But she wasn't going to stay here. She had no problems giving up her summer vacation to help A.J.; she knew that unengaged or not, he would have done the same for her in a heartbeat.

At least, the old A.J. would have. She wasn't so sure about who he'd become since the accident.

She spent a lot of the ride out to the big ranch being quizzed relentlessly by Eric about what she'd been doing for the past year and a half, even though she'd kept in contact as best she could, mostly with Beau, who was the next closest to her after A.J. She'd been back here three months ago, when this happened originally, but it wasn't a time for catching up and socializing.

Once upon a time, they had been extraordinarily happy together. Her parents had owned the ranch next to the Thorntons. Their respective spreads had been in their families forever, and although he was several years ahead of her in school, their families were close, so they were forced into each other's proximity fairly frequently.

A.J. had always been very much the eldest son and was nearly a carbon copy of his father, although he tended to put more stock in education than the elder Thornton, after whom he was named. Despite his father's various grunts and groans about it, A.J. was his own man even when young, and he'd always known he wanted to take over the ranch one day. He just wanted to do it his own way. He had always had eyes for one young Hope Granger, but had never made a move towards her.



Hope had been pining away for him since she was a young girl, and he was her first—and only—crush. She hadn't dated much in high school or during her own college career, because no one could quite measure up to one Austin Jeffers Thornton, Jr. No one was quite as tall or broad enough, and she was very sure that there was no one on the entire planet who was quite as much of a natural born leader as he was—except, perhaps, every other male Thornton in his family.

Hope had often wondered how his mother, Naomi, had put up with the six of them with their bossy tendencies, but then Naomi didn't take any guff from any of them, and they all thought the sun rose and set with her. Just a disappointed look from her made any or all of them—including her husband and her stubborn eldest—get all sheepish and apologize immediately for whatever indiscretion they might have committed.

They all tended to mill around the kitchen, especially at dinnertime. Austin had often suggested, once the ranch was doing better and they were no longer barely eking out an existence, that they get a cook so that she didn't have to do all that work. Originally she had been completely outraged at the thought, so much so that he never mentioned it again. Eventually, though, she did cave in to a certain extent—but not about cooking. If she was going to give up any aspect of caring for her beloved family, it was the one she hated, picking up and cleaning after six messy men; they hired a housekeeper, instead.

So A.J. had inherited not one, temper, but two. Even so, he was a very controlled and very stubborn man despite his deep passions, which at that time only included learning how to run the ranch as best he could and getting a college degree in business.

Hope was very careful not to let on to anyone how much A.J. intrigued her. First of all, her brother Stephen, who was two years younger than she was, would never have let her forget it, and he teased her quite enough already without giving him

anymore. And secondly, she'd never ever in her lifetime imagined that A.J. would actually want anything to do with her. As she was growing up, every time he so much as looked at her she wanted to run and hide. She knew what she was. She knew she had plain brown hair, even if it was luxuriously long, and a sometimes splotchy complexion, especially around him or any time she got nervous. She had two left feet and she wasn't nearly thin enough to be attractive to the likes of A.J.

She told herself that she was quite content to love him from afar.

But that changed to a certain degree after college, when she'd come back to her hometown of Haverhill, Texas, to teach at one of the local grade schools. She found that she was much less reticent at their occasional meetings. Oh, he still made her stomach ache uncomfortably, and the impulse to run somewhere—anywhere—else was still there, but she'd squelched it successfully on their first meeting after she'd returned home.

He was the only brother she felt that way about—the rest of them were worse than if they were her own brothers. They included both herself and Stephen, when he was around, in their innocent but incessant teasing. When she'd graduated and made it home in time to attend the famous annual Thornton Family barbeque, which contained more extended family and close friends than real blood relatives, the four younger brothers had formed an informal receiving line. Each had claimed a loving, if exaggeratedly hard, hug from her, and then passed her along, chiding her for not keeping in better touch and deliberately patting her on the head, which they knew she detested.

Complaining about the fact that they were messing up her hair only served to fuel the fire, of course. Finally, after ineffectually trying to swat them all away, she took a step away from them all to her left, hands in the air in front to prevent sneak attacks and her head bent, whining, "Get your grubby meat hooks out of my hair!"

“My hands aren’t in your hair,” came a deep rumble from well above her.

Steeling herself, mentally and physically, she lifted her eyes to his, feeling her heart hammering against her ribcage as their eyes locked.

“Don’t I get a hug?” he prodded.

Hope thought she’d faint, but she did it anyway. It might well be the only time she had a chance to get that close to him—to be in his arms! She’d figured she would die happy, having been hugged by him. So she went for it, wrapping her arms as far around him as she could and hugging him tightly. She took a deep breath while still in his arms, drinking in that masculine scent of his, mingled as it was with a light, spicy aftershave.

His was the only hug where no one was aiming to break a rib. It lasted only a beat or two beyond what could be considered a casual hug, but neither of the recipients thought of it as casual in the least.

Little did she know that A.J.’s eyes had closed the moment she had begun to hold him.

He had watched her grow up, date very occasionally, and go off to college, all the while loving her more than life itself from a calculated distance. But he hadn’t wanted to get involved in anything that might deter his goal of getting the ranch on a better footing, and he knew that if he indulged himself with her that would be the end of it. He wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything else.

A.J. felt as if he’d loved her forever. He couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t want her, didn’t ache for her every single night. But she had shown absolutely no interest in him whatsoever. If anything, she was closer to Beau than him, and it darned near killed him. He was a very planned person, rock steady, determined and stubborn, and he wanted to make sure that he had all his ducks in a row and that the both of them were through college before he made his move.

She was the doted on daughter in a family of only four, and had been practically adopted by the Thornton family. His parents had treated her as their own daughter, starved as his mom was for a little girl to spoil, and Hope had been in their house as much as she'd been in her own. But despite the fact that she'd always had huge birthdays and that someone, somewhere in her life would always see to it that she got what she wanted, Hope had somehow managed not to end up being bratty in the least.

If she had, it would have made his job as her eventual husband just that much harder—not that he shrank from that challenge in the least. A.J. knew exactly how to keep her in line.

He had kept track of her while she was gone through her connection to Beau, literally shaking in his size fifteen triple E boots whenever the report came back that she was dating someone. He was ultimately thankful that she didn't date much, even though he knew that it was because she didn't consider herself to be a particularly desirable woman.

He intended to teach her something very different once he got the chance.

She wasn't a knockout—never would be—and he didn't want that kind of a woman, anyway. But she was far from ugly, either. Hope was pretty and petite—especially from his vantage point—but he knew that she would argue about the petite designation to the death. She had sparkling green eyes and a broad, ready smile—except around him, it seemed. But her best feature, as far as he was concerned, was the mass of long, wavy hair that waved and curled nearly to her butt. He'd only seen her cut it once, in high school, and the loss of that glorious mane had wounded him deeply.

When they'd literally bumped into each other at a mutual friend's wedding, after she'd cut it into a close fitting cap of curls, he hadn't been able to curb himself from murmuring into her ear as he helped her steady herself, "Don't cut your hair again."

Hope had been on her way across the room in a beautiful dress of sea green that clung to her a lot more than he would have liked, and she'd given him the strangest look—which he'd expected—before she turned and continued on towards her milquetoast date.

A.J. knew that she would think that he had overstepped his bounds, and he fully expected that she would keep her hair short just because she knew that it would annoy him.

He would put up with that, but not for long. As soon as she was his and as soon as they were married, as he'd envisioned they would be, living in that big family ranch house and filling it with the love and laughter that it had known as he and his brothers grew up, cutting her hair would definitely become a spankable offense.