



Holden's Heart

Jayna Morrow

SWEET HOME, TEXAS



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Sweet Home Texas Series #3

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Dedication

For my creative and talented family.
So many gifts bestowed upon so many loving souls.
I'm thankful every moment of every day that God
allows me
to be a part of such an amazing family.
My cup runneth over!
~J.M.~

1

“Irelynn? Are you sure you can handle this? It’s not too late to get someone else. Though I couldn’t imagine who it would be...” Gabriel Hearth, having thrust the ultimate responsibility solely upon her shoulders without the slightest hint of doubt, folded his arms across his chest and sat on the edge of his desk.

Her breathing labored under his intense gaze, and her heart tumbled inside her chest. Her body had gone hollow and numb.

“Nobody knows the dairy inside and out like you do. You’re my right-hand man.”

The twist of her thoughts made it impossible for her to grasp one and verbalize it. Her tongue was useless anyway.

In the past, she’d panicked under pressure, so Gabriel took a different approach. “I’ll only be gone two weeks, and you can reach me by cell anytime you need. Can I count on you, Irelynn?”

“Let me get this straight. You and Sparrow and the kids and the dog, er, ‘canine son’ are going to Hawaii for two weeks to visit Wren and soak up the tropical

sun, and while you're gone, I'm in charge?"

"And Phoenix is coming. And the rest of Sparrow's family. And..."

"And Garrett and Micara and their baby girl." Irelynn didn't make a habit of interrupting her boss, but he was leaving her in a desperate situation. She'd always figured he'd ease her into this role, not leave for half a month, thousands of miles away, taking every member of the Hearth family with him. "You have a lot of faith in my knowledge, but you know I've always stayed behind the scenes."

"You need to come out of your shell. This experience could be good for you."

"I'm a paper pusher. I talk to the cows more than I talk to the humans who care for them."

"Listen. I remember when you first came to work for me. You applied for a bookkeeping position and quickly made yourself indispensable. I'm not the type to take orders, but you order me around. I'm smart enough to know when to listen, and I saw right away that you were right for this company. I have faith in you, Irelynn, not just your knowledge. You can do this."

"What if I can't?"

Gabriel, silenced by her display of vulnerability, waited a moment for her to continue.

"What if I need help?"

"Oh, no."

"What?" Through the glass that offered a view of the rotary milking parlor below, everything was in working order. Slade managed the floor, and plenty of employees manned their posts while one rotation of cows stepped out of the parlor making way for the next shift. "Everything is in order, Mr. Hearth."

Obviously.

Irelynn tucked her hair behind her ears before joining Gabriel in a staring match. His lips pressed into a tight frown, neck bent forward, and his eyes fixed in a stony expression. She broke eye contact and sighed, unable to handle "the look" from him. If she even disappointed him in the slightest, it would take days for her self-esteem to recover.

"Nothing's going on downstairs. I was talking about you. I'm not gonna stand here and listen to you doubt your own abilities." Gabriel's voice remained stern. This was the Gabriel she knew before Sparrow came into the picture. The stern, workaholic Gabriel who meant business. And he had her full attention right now. "Ever since I've known you, you've doubted yourself. You do amazing work, and you don't give yourself an ounce of credit. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six, give or take a couple of years. Don't you know it's not polite to ask a lady her age?" She rubbed her temples. "Sorry, I don't mean to be rude. The closer I get to thirty, the more I stress about my age."

"You need to stop stressing and look at all you've done in your young years."

Her forehead wrinkled. "I've always looked at it according to what I have yet to do. I've put my goals off until now. I'm almost thirty and accomplished very little."

"There are a lot of people who work their entire lives and don't achieve what you've done in...how many years have you worked here?"

"Six." She didn't want to disagree with the one person in her life who had faith in her, but she was

having a hard time seeing herself from his perspective. Her head bobbed up and down. "I can do this." She nodded firmly. "In fact, it should be a piece of cake. I'll stop worrying."

"Worriers don't pray, and prayers don't worry, but let's not get carried away. I didn't say running the dairy would be a piece of cake. It's challenging work. I know that you can handle whatever comes your way."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I can't tell you how much this opportunity means to me. Give me a run-down of my responsibilities."

"Yep, let's get right to it. No time to waste."

"And you're sure I'm the man for the job?" Irelynn gave him one last chance to change his mind. "This place is crawling with able bodies that'd scramble at the opportunity to run it. Show their worth. I'm not everything you think I am—"

"No, you're more. And didn't I tell you to stop with the self-loathing?"

"Yes, you did. Lead the way, Mr. Hearth."

"You want a hands-on tour instead of a list?"

"Um, whatever you think is best," she stated meekly. "I know you're in a hurry to leave. If I was going to Hawaii, I'd want to leave as soon as possible."

"I wish I had unlimited time to go through everything, but this was a last-minute trip. And we head out first thing in the morning." Irelynn nodded and let him continue. "And there are so many details to cover when traveling with an infant, so I'm giving you the short version. It's basic stuff. Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." She sucked in air until her lungs filled, and then held it. Her head spun like a tilt-a-whirl. Her heart beat faster than a clog dancer's feet

doing a solo at a hoedown. She was thankful to be sitting. It wasn't every day that the head of a multi-million dollar family business handed over the reins to a non-family member and left the state. The entire Hearth family legacy rested on her shoulders. He hadn't even gone yet, and she was already having chills in July. "Fire away." She concentrated on her breathing.

Gabriel picked a file up from his desk. He opened it and perused the contents. "Your lifeline," Gabriel responded finally, laying his palm flat on the opened file. "On the left is a weekly schedule and a daily list of to-dos. On the right is a list of employees responsible for each of the to-dos. All you have to do is make sure that every item gets done."

"You make it sound simple." She let some air escape her lungs. "Let me see that file."

"Of course. Look it over. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Quite a lot. What about walk-throughs? Or crisis plans? Or—"

"How could you have questions already? You've only held the file thirty seconds."

"I'm a quick reader. But it's not what's in this file that troubles me. It's what is not included in this file. The dairy isn't the only business you have, and I'm not familiar with anything else. Plus, there's your home and other properties."

Talking about all of Gabriel's business ventures sent her pulse back into overdrive. Gabriel's stern look didn't help either. She'd exasperated him. She could tell, and her hopelessness renewed. She dropped her head, defeated once again. She wished she could disappear into her white lab coat.

"I know you don't want me to be negative, but who am I kidding? I'm barely qualified to run the dairy. I can't run your entire life for two weeks. I'm one of the few females who work here. I'll be out of place amongst the men, and they won't respect me." Reality entered her atmosphere and crash landed. "Everything will self-destruct. As much as I appreciate the opportunity, I cannot accept it."

"That's a bunch of baloney, Irelynn," Gabriel scolded, with all the sensitivity of a junkyard dog on the night shift. He had a sweet, caring side, but Mr. No Nonsense took over in situations like this. "You are the right person to handle my entire life, as you put it. You are every bit as capable as any man who works for me. I may be going out on a limb here, but I believe you're even more capable. Women are designed to be in charge. Just ask my wife."

"Sparrow is an exception."

"Maybe, but you're not much different than she is. Sparrow is...more...well, in your face about things."

Gabriel meant well, but putting her on a pedestal wasn't helping. It would only make it farther for her to fall. It didn't help that her own brother had provided years of faithful service and leadership for the Hearth family ventures before moving on to bigger and better things. His picture still hung in the Hearth Dairy Hall of Fame. Sean the Magnificent cast a rather large shadow.

She'd forever be remembered as Sean's little sister, Irelynn, the Quiet One. Irelynn, the Wallflower. If she were ever to prove her worth, she'd have to come out of her shell as Gabriel mentioned earlier. "If only I had as much faith in myself as you have in me." Taking a deep breath, she drew her lab coat tighter. She had a

backbone somewhere in the dorsal region of her body. She wiggled a bit to activate it and straightened.

"I wouldn't leave you fumbling in the dark, Irelynn. I have a file with detailed instructions for everything." He reached back and picked up several more files, then pressed them into her hands. "Your fears are unwarranted, but the effect they have on your emotional well-being is far too high a price to pay. Pray, and I'll be praying for you. I need you to handle it for me. You're the only one who knows this business inside and out, who knows how I want the business handled. Who else could I depend on to make endless rounds? To obsessively file and organize everything? To coo to the cows on the milking parlor floor?"

"OK, OK!"

"If you turn me down, then I'll have to cancel the whole trip," he stated matter-of-factly. "I'll have a talk with Sparrow. Tell her this isn't the best time to get away. We'll visit Wren where he's stationed next. He's being transferred, which is why we were rushing to visit him in Hawaii. It's our last chance." He shook his head, and then dropped to the floor. "I'm on my knees, begging you to say you'll do this for me, for my family."

"I want to help you out..."

"Then do it, Irelynn. You can handle this."

Panic seized control, rendering her mute. A desperate squeak escaped.

"I'll take that strange, throaty noise as a yes. Hawaii, here we come!"

Another squeak, higher in pitch.

"All the answers you need are in these files, and I'm only a phone call away." He stood, rounded his desk, and sank into his leather chair. "For your hard

work and dedication, I'm prepared to offer you a fantastic incentive package. A raise, a bonus, and perks galore."

She'd settle for her picture in the Hearth Dairy Hall of Fame, but who was she to argue?

"That's generous of you, Mr. Hearth." Her voice shook. "I'd still feel better if I had a back-up person I could call upon if I got desperate." She'd made a lot of excuses, but this time she wasn't. The thought of a partner made her heart rate lessen.

Gabriel chuckled. "All right, Irelynn. I'll meet you halfway. There is another person who could step in if the need arises. I had considered the possibility of you getting sick or having an emergency of your own. I won't name him, but rest assured that I'll send him your way if you get overwhelmed. Now, I want you to relax and enjoy this experience. For the most part, it'll be like a regular day at work."

"Only I won't remain behind the scenes in my comfy office, with an occasional interaction with four-legged furry creatures. The next two weeks will involve—"

"A lot more than you're used to, but nothing that you can't handle."

Irelynn sighed and flipped through the files on her lap. "I'm in over my head."

"What do you want out of life, Irelynn?" he asked.

"I want to be accepted. I want to be appreciated. I want to make others proud of me. I don't want to be a disappointment." If she was putting herself out there, she might as well start right now.

Gabriel's head bobbed. "You've got every opportunity to have those things. Sparrow's an advocate of tough love. She used it on me. She taught

me how to use it on Slade, and now I'm gonna use it on you. Tomorrow marks the beginning of a new way of life for you."

"Sink or swim."

"That's right. Don't worry, though, you'll swim like an Olympian. I'll be your coach. And be comforted in the fact that there's a mystery teammate who'll jump in at a moment's notice."

"I'd prefer someone there from beginning to end."

"Well, that wouldn't qualify as tough love, would it?"

Irelynn summoned up inner courage. How had she managed to get this far gone? "No, it wouldn't. I know I'm acting like a big baby about this."

"Big baby is kinda harsh. You're letting fear rule your life. There was a time when I fed into something so that it grew bigger than I was and took control. Listen to me when I tell you that you have to stop feeding your fears. Starve them out and take control of your life."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm always here for you, but I ain't gonna lie to you. Study those files tonight. Report to work at the usual time. Randy Overman, the floor supervisor, will get the first shift rolling. Then go through the checklist."

"Have a blast in Hawaii, Mr. Hearth."

"I'll enjoy the beach for both of us, but there's only so much fun a man can handle."

"Good one."

"Oh, one more thing." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a silver ring. "Keys to the kingdom, my friend. They're labeled and ready to go. And...another thing." This time he produced a tiny manila envelope

and handed it to her. One side was open.

She slid out a rectangle of glittery, gold plastic. The company credit card. She was a signer on it and had used it many times for various business reasons.

"I'm entrusting you with this. You never know. Guard it well."

"I'll do my best."

"That's all I'd ever ask of you."

She'd been "tough-loved" into this situation, and stepping out of her comfort zone was an opportunity she couldn't miss.

2

"There's a man with something heavy weighing on his mind." The voice of his assistant, Amber, alerted him to her presence.

Holden Hearth sat upright on his piano bench and stared out the wall of windows that illuminated the baby grand. He couldn't play a single note, but he retreated to this spot in the house that afforded the best view to reflect.

"Why do you say that?" His gaze continued to follow a chestnut horse trotting along, as his assistant placed his usual cup of coffee on top of the piano.

"By this time, you're usually getting ready for whatever adventure you've planned for the day. Anything I should know about?"

"Nope."

"Is your nephew causing problems again?"

"My nephew never has been a problem for me."

"Don't get upset. Let me clarify, he's causing problems for his father. His father is your older brother, right? Your family is so large, I get them mixed up."

"It has nothing to do with Slade at all."

"I see we're engaging in a game of twenty questions. OK, I'm up for it. What could be bothering the rich, powerful, tall, strikingly handsome if I may, CEO who has everything? Has something happened to

your brother?" She wasn't giving up until she'd weaseled the truth out of him. "Is that why you're leaving all this grandeur for two weeks and driving to...what's it called again? Sugar Shack, Texas?"

"Sweet Home."

"Right...Sweet Home. That's near Bison, Texas."

"Bishop."

"Yes, Bishop...where the buffalo roam."

"Close enough. And no, there's nothing wrong with Gabriel or Garrett. My older and younger brothers are taking their families on vacation to Hawaii."

"And they can't afford someone to check on the house?"

"I should have known you'd want more information. Gabriel owns a large dairy farm, amongst other things. He wants me close by to look after Irelynn, his office manager. He's got complete faith in her, but she has doubts about her abilities."

"Incognito, huh?"

"Should be a nice change of pace." He swiveled his legs over the piano bench, and a wicked grin spread across his face. "Why don't you buy a pair of boots and come with me? Enjoy the sights and sounds of Sweet Home."

"And what sounds would those be—crickets chirping?" Her eyes grew wide. "You couldn't pay me to endure a trip like that."

"I do pay you."

"What, oh...wait. I may be your personal assistant, but crickets and roughing it are not in my job description. Why don't you get one of your buddies to accompany you?"

"They're not much for roughing it either." Not an

accurate description, but close. His friends were Dallas elite, and while they would jump at the opportunity to hunt big game in Alaska or Africa or climb a mountain, they would never go for two weeks or even two days in a rural Texas town with no first-class amenities or real adventure.

"You don't have to stay there the entire two weeks. You could fly over every few days to check in, couldn't you?"

"I could." He glanced up and caught her staring at him as if he'd grown a second head. "But I haven't been back to Sweet Home for a real visit since I left home. I've been everywhere. I've seen everything, done everything. I thrive on new challenges. But this is what I need in my life right now." Sweet Home held his fondest and worst memories, his heart and his hurt.

"So this is kind of like a project for you. A challenge."

"Yep." His line of business was a far cry from challenging. Hearth Holdings, Inc. happened by accident, and he'd stumbled into more wealth than he could ever dream of without doing much. Except what he loved, what he hid from the world. Not even his assistant knew how he made his first fortune.

And it had started in Sweet Home. Years of public torment that led to private triumph.

He was like a superhero who kept his true identity a secret. There were days when all he wanted was to soar into downtown Sweet Home, land with a thud that shook the ground and sent cattle stampeding, rip off his mask, and declare, "Behold, it is I, Holden Hearth, the one who..."

He shook the thought away. There wouldn't be a great unmasking, but he'd still like to walk the streets

of Sweet Home undetected. Now that the opportunity presented itself, he was a little unsure about it. He'd have to face people from his past, good or bad.

Still, the prospect of a new challenge fueled him forward.

"Goodness, you are so out of sorts," Amber commented. "Now I'm thinking this might be therapeutic."

He knew where this conversation was going. If she wasn't willing to travel with him and work, that meant she had another destination in mind.

"And you know what would be good for me?"

Here it comes. She had that wistful look in her eyes.

"Two weeks on a beach in Cozumel. I mean, if you're not here, there's nothing essential for me to do."

"I knew it. Go ahead and book it. You've earned a trip. Have fun in Mexico. I'll be sure to send you a postcard from...Sugar Shack." The girl worked hard and racked up the unused sick days. She worked crazy hours, performing whatever tasks he assigned to her. She deserved a vacation every now and then.

~*~

Irelynn added a bit more shading to the sketch she was working on and then held it back to critique it. "Is it any good?" she asked and turned it around for a better view, her arms shaking as she did so. "Be honest."

The brown and white dairy cow twitched its nose before returning to its grain.

With a sigh, she moved the sketch from the top of the clipboard to the bottom and returned to her work. Cows made terrible critics. Of course, the positive side

was that they never complained or pointed out her mistakes. Their general disinterest bothered her the most. She was convinced they meant well, and most days took their indifference as a sign of satisfaction with her work.

There were many benefits to having cows for co-workers.

They didn't care if she showed up at work without makeup and her hair pulled up in a messy bun, or if she spent her days lost in thought without speaking a word unless necessary.

Of course, by not dressing up and interacting with people she was selling herself short, just as Gabriel had claimed. She didn't put herself out there professionally. She was content in her bubble.

Her chances of remaining in that bubble for the next two weeks were slim to none. Already, she'd had a brief meeting with Randy Overman and had spoken to at least one person in every department on her first rounds. Fumbled, mumbled, and bumbled over the daily task list so much she left them more confused than when she had arrived. If she could manage everything from the safety of her office, maybe venture out to the rotary milking parlor a time or two, then everything would be perfect.

Gabriel's last-minute vacation, she decided, glancing at the number tags in the cows' ears and checking them off her list, had both elements of design and disaster. Sink or swim, she remembered. She was in charge.

She...was...in...charge.

Suddenly, the idea hit her that, for the next two weeks, she alone was in charge. If she didn't feel like making rounds and having meetings, she didn't have

to. She could assign the task to someone else. She'd still go by Gabriel's homestead and take care of his personal property, but operations here at the dairy were about to change.

She reached out to the nearest cow and scratched her behind the ear. Then she bent down and peered right into her big brown cow eyes. "Now I need to find that perfect person to handle all the tasks I don't want to do."

3

Picturesque was the perfect word to describe Sweet Home. A serene little town with brick streets, stone buildings of various textures and colors, and pastures, trees, dinky lakes, and ponds sprinkled around.

A landscape and portrait artist's dream, she'd sketched every inch of this town from the time she was old enough to hold a pencil. She still made time to sketch here and there, but her day job came first. It paid the bills.

Irelynn parked her sedan, which sported Hearth's Dairy Farms logos on the two front doors. Gabriel paid for her gas and mileage to run errands for the business since it was marked as a company vehicle. Now her car sat right beside his work truck at the head of the driveway. Micara's landscaping company had tended the property recently. Mowing lines striped the lawn and the flowerbeds sported a fresh layer of wood chips. She grabbed her checklist and a pen and alighted from the car. It didn't take long to verify the house or outbuildings hadn't been broken into overnight. Now it was time for another day of rounds and paperwork and decisions at the dairy. She couldn't put it off any longer.

She turned to make her way back to her vehicle but something shiny caught her eye. She squinted at