

Pretend Mom Book Excerpt

Chapter One

Dixie Kincaid felt weak, almost sick. Her fear of flying had taken its toll. On wobbly legs she careened down the exit ramp toward the main gate. Taking a deep quelling breath, she pushed her chestnut hair from her face. Willing herself not to tremble, she grasped the wall for support as she glanced around for a familiar face. No one stepped forward. No one called her name.

For a split second she secretly wished Kevin had been here to greet her. But then, she knew that was merely wishful thinking. Why should he?

It had been three long years since she'd been home, and then only to be whisked to the cemetery and back to catch her plane. It had been seven years since she had actually spent any time at her home. Much too long, she quickly realized.

She glanced about for a familiar face. There were none. And suddenly she felt very alone. Maybe because she was so used to cameras and newsmen greeting her. She had wanted it this way, she reminded herself. No cameras, no newsmen, just someone from home to greet her.

Perhaps she might have to rent a car and drive home. She hadn't thought of that. She fumbled in her purse for her luggage ticket.

"Hello, Dixie," came a lazy, southern drawl that could only belong to one man.

Before she realized his intention, his lips feather-touched hers.

Hints of cattle, hay and clean earth filled her nostrils--a strangely compelling scent.

Goose bumps prickled her skin, making her tingle

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When the man pulled away with a satisfied smile, and Dixie was left to compose herself, and her thoughts.

"Welcome home." The man's voice sounded raspy.

"Mike Dalton!" she murmured aloud, trying to make sense of his actions and her reactions. Gathering her wits about her, she cast him a disdainful glance as she tried to control her shaking limbs. First an airplane ride from hell, now a bolt from the blue like Mike Dalton greeting her. And what a greeting! A kiss was the last thing she expected from Mike. What next?

Just because he kissed her didn't mean she'd changed her mind about him, nor he about her. He shouldn't be here, her mind reeled. But then she knew why he was! Summoning her control she straightened her denim jumper and gave him a guarded smile.

His eyes glistened as his moist lips firmed into a warm, welcoming smile. How could he stand there and look so self-satisfied?

His roughly etched features hinted a hawk-like quality as he stared down into her surprised face with amusement.

Mike vibrated his own brand of southern charm. His grin was too wide, his nose was a smidgen crooked, and those eyes, not even a real brown, more gold--and all seeing. His hair, a rich shade of mahogany, was short cropped and invited a ruffle as he adjusted his hat. Pleasantly handsome--and terribly compelling, he wasn't the kind of man a woman could walk away from without remembering.

In faded jeans, a white shirt and a jean jacket, he wore the word virile like some men wore after-shave.

Despite her better sense, Dixie's heart raced to an odd beat. A familiar beat she thought long forgotten. She never understood her reactions to him. No one affected her like Mike, not even his brother, Kevin. There had always been this electrical current running between them, as though there were things unspoken. It made absolutely no sense how his mere presence could affect her equilibrium. It had been seven long years since she laid eyes on Mike, and yet it seemed like yesterday as he stared back at her with that same familiar expression.

He knew instinctively how to confuse her emotionally. That kiss raised more than a little curiosity, obviously in both their minds, from the expression on his face, as though he was surprised by his own actions .

Where was her family? Why weren't they here? And why did this stubborn, handsome man have to stand here and look at her so smugly?

Deep down, Dixie suspected she knew why Mike was here. It was Kevin. Mike was still protecting his brother from the vamp. Her!

Veiling her thoughts, Dixie glanced innocently at him. "I suppose you're here to pick me up?"

"That's right. Everyone was tied up at the time. So, I volunteered."

"How nice of you. Forgive me if I'm a little startled to see you, Mike. But you're about the last person I expected."

"I gathered that much." His glance slid over her like thick hot fudge melting over ice cream. "You look a little shaken; you want to get a bite to eat?"

"That might be a good idea." At least with food in her mouth she wouldn't have to do much talking.

Mike's smooth southern drawl brought Dixie's eyes to his penetrating gaze. "Great. I forgot breakfast, myself. But let's get something down the road, okay? The prices here are outrageous."

He touched her elbow and guided her through the growing crowd. In a matter of minutes he had rescued her luggage from a baggage chute and carried both cases with ease to his slightly battered pickup.

Mike watched her hug the door with open amusement. She couldn't help but wonder if she measured up to his expectations. He certainly did to hers.

That kiss didn't fool her though--just rattled her.

Once they were settled and on their way, he switched on the air-conditioner. She had forgotten how unbearably hot it got in Texas.

"So, are you staying long?" His glance met hers across the small confines of the truck.

"No, it's just a vacation."

"Then New York is still your home?"

"It's where my work is, yes. I've been there seven years and I'm finally making progress."

He didn't seem that interested. That didn't surprise her, since Mike had been the one who had scoffed at her making a singing career seven years ago.

He maneuvered the truck like a well-trained horse.

"I've heard you on the radio." He checked the traffic before pulling onto the highway.

She swallowed a dose of pride she left behind. "I didn't think you liked rock music."

"Not particularly, no."

He didn't explain, she didn't ask.

"I kinda expected you to show up in one of those weird costumes most rock stars wear on stage."

"I don't usually travel in full make-up. I didn't want to be recognized. I even went so far as to use a phony name with the airlines. And obviously it worked."

"Yeah, I could see where that could be a problem."

She met his mocking smile.

Knowing Mike was old-fashioned and believed a woman belonged in the home, having babies, she refrained from elaborating on her work. Although she had to squelch the overwhelming desire to brag about herself. He probably wouldn't believe that she liked her work, even though it wasn't what she really wanted to do.

"So . . ." Mike drawled, his eyes escaping the long hot road long enough to send her a quizzing look. "Are you married?"

"No--uh, I've been too busy to settle down. Besides, I believe in finding Mr. Right, first."

"Mr. Right. Is that what you're waiting for?" Now he was goading her.

"I'm not waiting for anything." She squirmed as the air-conditioner made a funny noise and clicked off.

Mike banged on the dash and the air came back on. "Sorry, I've been meaning to have that fixed."

"I'm surprised you're still driving this . . ."

Grinning he nodded. "Best work truck I ever had. Couldn't give old Betsy up."

Surely this wasn't the only vehicle he owned. "You haven't bought a new one?" She bit her lip for asking.

"No need. This gets me where I want to go."

"How can you impress a woman in something like this?" she squawked.

"I'm not trying to impress anyone, especially a woman."

When an awkward silence ensued, she chanced a glance at him again. "So, why didn't Emily and the boys come with you?"

Mike didn't answer right away. The traffic was thick, people were just getting off work and Mike seemed frustrated all of a sudden. Perhaps he wanted to be rid of her.

Finally he shot her a smile and another long lazy glance as they came to an abrupt halt. Someone with car trouble ahead was holding up traffic.

"Emily got involved in the annual church charity bazaar again this year," he said. "She was elected to the committee. And you know how she gets when she's involved in something for the church. She knew you'd understand, though. Besides, it's still a long drive home, and Emily was never fond of travel. Especially traffic jams on freeways during a heat wave. I think she'll be relieved you're finally home, though."

"She sounded strange on the phone. I sensed there was something wrong."

"Oh, I wouldn't say there's anything really wrong, but she is anxious to talk to you." There was a car pulled onto the side of the road. "Do you mind if I stop and help them? They've got three kids in the back seat and, in this heat, that can't be much fun."

"No, go ahead." Dixie craned her neck to watch.

Mike shook hands with the man, and in minutes they were busy with the lug nuts. A few minutes later he came back to the truck, and threw his tools in the truck bed.

They were halfway across town when he spotted a place to eat. "This all right with you?" He gestured towards a hamburger drive in.

"Sure, sounds great right now. I'm not sure I could wait since you have to stop off and pick up a--bull, didn't you say?" She gestured toward the trailer he was pulling.

"Sorry about that. It won't take long. I've already signed the papers and paid the man, so all I have to do is load him up and take him home. It was on the way home so I figured might as well kill two birds with one stone."

"I suppose I should be grateful I didn't have to get a shuttle." She didn't look at him, but the little blond carhop on her way over to the truck captured his attention.

"Give us a couple of burgers with mustard and fries and a couple of Cokes." He ordered for her.

He glanced over at her and smiled. "Isn't that what you used to order most of the time at the Dairy Mart back home?"

She nodded, surprised that Mike Dalton would have remembered such a thing.

Dixie firmed her lips when he dished out the money, though. Being old fashioned he was bound to pay for both their meals but it still irritated her no end.

He turned towards her, pushing his hat away from his face, and relaxing behind the wheel.

"Something wrong?"

"I can pay for my own food," she said.

"Feeling indebted, are we?" He grinned.

"Am I indebted?"

"Not in the least. Just call me old-fashioned. When a lady eats with me, she's automatically my guest."

"Thanks, I didn't have change for a hundred anyhow." She chuckled, wanting to make light of a situation she'd blown out of proportion.

He smiled--this time with her, not at her--and some of the tension between them eased. Still, Dixie knew exactly why Mike was here. He was making good and sure she left his brother alone. Why Mike had tried to come between her and Kevin all those years ago, she didn't know. After all, it had always been a one-sided affair. Kevin had no feelings for her...at least not back then, but maybe now--

"Glad you haven't lost your sense of humor." He leaned back and smiled at her.

"So, Emily is still doing volunteer work?" She groped for a change in subject. Too many compliments from Mike could be dangerous.

"Never stopped as far as I know."

How silly she'd been. She should have known Emily always got involved in community projects, offering to do almost everything herself. Of course, she had too many irons in the fire to come to the airport. And she did get carsick. Funny how things like that slipped your mind when you hadn't been home in so long.

Still, not having family to greet her at the airport left Dixie feeling uneasy. She hadn't dealt with Mike in a long time, and according to her heart, she didn't know how to deal with him. He looked hungry for a skirmish, and he still managed to make her feel like an awkward schoolgirl at times. His very presence made her heart rate soar. There seemed to be a strange kind of chemistry between them. They seemed to respond to each other physically, but mentally they were worlds apart--and knew it.

"She wanted someone here to greet you. She asked me to pick you up."

"She did?"

"You're surprised. Well, I guess that's because you haven't been home in a while. You're going to have to get used to the idea of me being around. I'm over at your place almost as much as I'm at home."

"Oh? I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Mom and the boys always liked you."

"You don't sound like you're a part of my fan club."

"I didn't know you had one."

Emily was Dixie's stepmother, and the twin teenage boys were her half-brothers. She'd quit thinking of them as anything other than her only family long ago. Her real mother died when she was a young child, and she barely remembered her. Her father died three years ago of a heart attack, and then her sister, Audrey, died just last year. Death had taken its toll on Dixie and her family, something Dixie was still finding hard to deal with.

It had never dawned on Dixie that she might actually be needed here. That prospect brightened her mood a little. Being needed was refreshing. She always felt like the black sheep of the family, wanting to do things no one else did.

Emily had always taken her side with her father, thus creating more harmony than friction. Tom, Will, and Emily were all the family she had left, and they were precious to her. Except for her Uncle Paul, whom Dixie really didn't count. He thought she was the wild one of the family and had nothing to do with her. Wild? She'd gone to New York City to become a rock star, and that was considered wild on the Johnson side of the family.

A deep sadness filled Dixie. The loneliness of coming home without her father and only sister surrounded her. Audrey's death had devastated her greatly. She'd been killed in a plane crash on her way to visit Dixie in New York. Dixie knew it was foolish, but somehow she felt responsible for Audrey's death, and ever since shuddered when flying.

Funny how coming home brought all the old memories to the surface. Even though her father hadn't approved of her running off to New York to find her fame and fortune, he had encouraged her to think big.

"Are you all right?" Mike's voice penetrated her absorbed mind, as an arrogant brow shot upward in question and tawny gold eyes probed deeper. What was he searching for? What did he think he was going to find?

"I'm fine. I'm just a little shaky over the plane ride."

"Have a rough trip?"

"Not really. Not for anyone who enjoys flying I suppose. I just don't enjoy it."

"Why didn't you tell me? I thought you looked pale, but I attributed it to seeing me."

"It's nothing, really."

"You were shaking a few minutes ago." He frowned, studying her closer. "Why didn't you take a train or bus, if flying bothers you?"

"Because I didn't want to lose most of my vacation traveling back and forth. Besides, Mom sounded upset when she called me. I wanted to get here as fast as I could."

He reached across and took her hand in his. A big, warm hand. It startled Dixie. She forgot how caring the people in small towns could be. She started to pull away, but Mike was only being Mike--the protector.

"I'm fine now."

"You sure?"

She nodded and pulled her hand from his. Mike frowned.

After a short silence, he turned in the seat. "So, how's life in New York?"

"Busy."

"I'm surprised you took the time off work."

"Well, I was due a vacation, and Mother sounded distraught." Dixie cast him a questioning look.

"She can hardly wait to see you. I wouldn't say distraught, but anxious."

"I want to know how Mom and the boys are. Is there something wrong? Is that why you came? What's been going on?"

"Wrong? No, there's nothing wrong, really. Although I suspect Emily needs to talk with you. But, they're fine. The boys would have come with me, but they're both in summer school. Not much new to tell in town. A few moved off to better careers, like you. A few married. I'm surprised you haven't asked about Kevin."

"I'm sorry." Dixie swallowed. He mentioned Kevin so casually, yet Dixie knew Mike was anything but casual about his brother. She wasn't prepared to talk about Kevin right now, and especially with Mike. "I was waiting for you to tell me." She didn't want Mike to know she was rattled.

It was all too awkward a moment. Mike couldn't possibly know what she was feeling about Kevin after all these years. Just because he was opposed to them getting together so

long ago didn't mean he still felt the same. Maybe he had mellowed. Maybe he wanted to tell her.

"And how is he?" She tried not to sound too interested, yet she couldn't stop fidgeting with her hands, and he glanced down at them as she spoke.

"He's doing great, actually. He's running for senator now. He's happy."

"I'm glad," she said, only to see Mike's brow arch arrogantly. The thought of Kevin running for senator startled and pleased her. She had known Kevin would do well. No wonder Mike was so anxious to keep her away from him. It wouldn't do for a senator to be seen with a wild-looking rock star. Even she could imagine the headlines that could cause.

"Are you?"

"Happy? Of course. But I want you to know I don't intend sitting here and talking to you about Kevin." Her outburst cost her what little leverage she had. He was prepared for a battle, by the look on his face, so she changed direction. "So, you were elected to come and get me?"

"Something like that."

"I'm a little surprised you had the time. I mean, as I recall, you had a good size ranch to run."

"Still do. But I attended an auction in Mesquite and have to pick up that bull I mentioned earlier. Like I said, we'll be stopping on the way home, if you don't mind."

"You're breeding cattle now?"

"Just started."

Naturally, he hadn't come all this way just to pick her up, she thought. "I hope picking me up wasn't too much out of the way for you."

"No," he winked. "Not really."

Dixie looked away again, unable to assemble her thoughts. Mike was just too disturbing.

But, despite her efforts to ignore him, she found herself curious about Mike. What had happened to him in all these years? Had he married? Did he have a houseful of kids? Their eyes met and she looked away hurriedly. Looking into those intense, tawny eyes was a little too disturbing. She'd have to change the subject completely. Mike Dalton was affecting her strangely.

"Poor Mom, she really has to stay after Tom and Will to keep them in school. I wish it came easier for them. They hate it. I remember her promising Dad they would finish school even if they were twenty-five when they did."

"She's got her hands full with that promise."

"I can hardly wait to see them. It's been so long."

"Too long!"