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PROOF OF WORTH
By
Karen Hankins

Chapter One

Kate Wells stood near the arrivals area in the Austin airport. The short black dress and three-inch heels might be glamorous for an evening out, but the outfit drew too much attention on a sunny January afternoon. People passing by kept looking at her. Men, actually. Quick glances cut her way, then some turned for a second look. A sweater would've been a good idea, the temperature inside the airport terminal worse than it was outside, and long sleeves could have covered her exposed shoulders so she didn't feel quite so vulnerable. The outfit, and the fact she was in the city at all, proved that for her sister, Kate would do nearly anything. All she needed to set everything right was to see Greta's brown curls and familiar smile in the swarm of airline travelers headed for the exit.

"I see you left your spurs at home."

Kate turned. The man smiling at her wore dark sunglasses propped on a prominent nose, one that may have once been broken. The brim of his black cowboy hat was lined with a satin ribbon. Curly dark hair stopped below his ears.

He held a photograph taken exactly one year ago at the ranch. Kate had finished work for the day, her chaps, jeans and boots coated with red dust. Her braid was coming loose beneath her sweat-stained cowboy hat.

In the picture, Greta was wearing the black dress and heels. Arms draped around each other, grinning wide. Greta filled out the

top of the dress much better. She'd left it and the heels behind, as though Kate would have an occasion to wear them.

"I'm Clayton." The man punched a number into his phone and then held it out. "Greta will explain."

Kate saw nothing but her reflection in his sunglasses, dual images of her thin face and less than straight teeth. Her mouth was hanging open. She pressed her lips together as the realization slid home, the lump of disappointment settling within. Her sister had broken her promise.

He waved the phone at her, and she took it. Greta's laughter carried to her clearly through the handset.

"Happy Birthday, Katie," she said. "How do you like your present?"

Kate wobbled a few steps away from the man, in the general direction of those waiting in line to pass through security.

"Where are you." She said it rather than asked, the answer obvious, the truth plain as day.

"Stuck in Houston," Greta said. "I'm so sorry, I can't make it for your special day. Do you feel really old?"

Her sister was four years younger, still safely in her twenties. Last year thirty hadn't bothered Kate, so why should thirty-one? She'd been hoping Greta's visit would dispel the odd sense of dread, but she wasn't coming. The plans made were wasted, but worse was the knowledge that Kate likely wouldn't see Greta now until maybe next Christmas. That was too long. Kate had to do something about the ranch now.

"Why aren't you here?" She hated the thin desperation in her voice.

"I have this client," Greta said. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime."

Kate had heard it before, the exact same words. Greta rarely thought about their Lampasas ranch one hundred miles north of Austin. Or of her sister either, it sometimes seemed. Greta had promised a month ago she would fly in for a couple days, that she wouldn't miss Kate's birthday.

"If you're not coming, why am I in this stupid dress?" she asked. "And what am I supposed to do with Gorgeous?"

He stood ten feet away, his smile gone. The sunglasses hid his eyes, but something held him captivated. The pink tip of his tongue lay against his top lip. She looked behind her to see what drew his attention. A growing line of travelers clutched carry-on bags, cell phones, and books. One couple pushed a baby stroller, a toddler grasping his mother's hand.

"His name is Clayton Williams," Greta said. "Teach him to ride. A short course in how to look like a cowboy," Greta explained. "Is he dressed western?"

"Oh, yeah. He's got Dude written all over him."

She clutched the phone and tried to decide what it was about him that made his outfit obvious. Most people in the country ironed creases into their jeans, but his were dark, brand new. There wasn't a single scratch in his polished boots. Only the brown leather jacket, and the leather duffel on the floor beside him, showed any wear.

The combination nonetheless worked. The pale yellow shirt was a good color for him, highlighting his tanned face and hands. The shirt was tucked in, revealing a lean stomach and athletic build.

Greta giggled. "He's very sweet, but he doesn't know anything about horses."

"I have six colts to ride every day," Kate reminded her. "Plus care of the hundred and fifty cattle. And the fences. I don't have time to mess with him."

"Don't let him help you."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you get anybody to help who shows up."

"If you were here," she told Greta pointedly, "I wouldn't have to do that."

There was nothing but silence from her sister. Usually Greta argued that someday she'd move back, but now she didn't say it. Had she the last time they'd discussed the ranch? Maybe not.

Clayton still gaped in her direction. She stepped toward him and reached for his left hand. His palm was warm, the skin firm, faint calluses.

"As if he could help," she said.

He turned his hand over so that he gently grasped her fingers, a soft smile flitting across his lips.

"What do you need?" he asked.

She liked how her hand fit in his. His voice was low and despite the smile, he seemed serious. He was offering to help her and didn't even know what she might ask. And if she did, where would she start? What, on the six thousand acres of gamagrass and red rocks, prickly pear and mesquite, did she most need? The ranch was too much for one woman, but she managed by not thinking about the future. She focused on each day as it came, operating on the belief that her sister would someday soon return to join in the partnership. She couldn't think otherwise because without Greta, the ranch would have to be sold.

"How are you at roofing?" she asked, looking up because he was taller than her even though she wore heels. "The house needs it bad."

"Don't you dare get him on the roof!" Greta's shout carried through the phone. "And put him on a safe horse."

"He doesn't look that fragile." She gently pulled her hand from his. It occurred to her it was dangerous to carry on two conversations at once.

Greta said, "My client's paying a small fortune for you to teach him to ride. Clayton's going to film a commercial for Western Swing. They signed him before they found out not all Texans know horses."

That meant he was an actor, which explained why he had smooth hands, but he didn't look all that pretty for the screen. Western Swing commercials usually featured rodeo champions or real life cowboys. He did actually look the part, especially with his broken nose. Rodeo was the one sport she watched, and he was too tall for anything but roping. Rough stock riders were usually small and wiry.

"How much are they paying me?" she asked.

The amount Greta quoted was equal to what Kate would earn training three colts for a month. It wouldn't put a dent in what she owed her fiancé, but it might help postpone the wedding a bit longer.

"Good deal," Kate told her. "I'll do it." She held up her finger to Clayton and then stumbled away from him again, five small steps, then ten, walking as though she were inching down a steep hill. Her toes were numb. "What about me, Greta? Why am I dressed up like an idiot?"

"You're beautiful," her sister said. "And you deserve better than Stuart. You don't love him, Katie."

Kate closed her eyes against the familiar argument, but a thought slipped in over her usual response. She glanced at Clayton.

"Wait a minute," she said to Greta. "You sent him for me?"

"No," her sister's denial was quick. "He's there for the commercial."

A logical voice blared from the loudspeakers, warning that passengers should not give their luggage to strangers. Kate focused once more on the couple with the children. They'd moved close enough to security that they were removing their shoes, even the baby's booties. A young woman not far behind them rested her hands on her prominent bump, although she seemed too young to be expecting. Two women behind her were decked out in drab business suits and sensible black loafers. They were frowning in the direction of Kate's legs.

"Greta, I miss you. When you didn't show for Christmas, you said you'd be here on my birthday."

Greta said, "I'll be up in three weeks. I will. It might be time for me to find a new position."

Her younger sister hinted often now about starting her own advertising agency. Greta had gone away to college, then she'd gotten a good job. She seemed perfectly content to live in a downtown Houston apartment, something Kate didn't understand at all.

"You can go home now and change," Greta said. "Have Clayton stay in the spare room."

She glanced back at him again. Clayton was writing on a paper napkin, which he then handed to a teenager with acne. A boy of nine or ten pulled the red cap from his head and handed it to Clayton, the boy's eyes huge with wonder as Clayton leaned low to ask a question.

Kate said, "What's wrong with the motel in town?"

"No," Greta said quickly. "That's thirty miles away, and you only have three days to turn him into a cowboy."

"Greta?"

"Um-hmm?" When her sister was multitasking she became vague.

"Why is he signing autographs? Who is he?"

"Sorry, Katie, I have to go. Have a very happy day. I love you."

Her sister hung up.

Kate crossed her arms and watched as Clayton talked with a stooped man wearing wire-rimmed glasses. Then Clayton picked up his duffel, crossing the distance briskly to take her arm. "Let's get out of here."

"My truck's this way." She pointed toward the wide revolving door, leaning on his arm as she tried to keep up, but his stride was long. "Slow down," she said. "These shoes are killing me."

"I could carry you," he offered.

"Oh, yeah, right."

He dropped the bag and bent fluidly, his arm behind her back, the other under her legs. Suddenly, she was no longer standing. Kate wrapped her arm around his neck, and clutched his shirt front with her right fist. He smelled good, a vague scent of cologne or aftershave. That same faint smile played across his lips and although she could barely see his eyes through the dark glasses, it was obvious he was looking only at her. She could feel his heart thumping against her knuckles.

"How's this?"

His voice had taken on a lower tone, one that caused her own heart's beat to change tempo. She knew with certainty she hadn't been this close to a man in a long time, and never with one whose last name wasn't Anderson.

"Actually," she admitted, "not bad. Want to carry me to the truck?"

"I don't think so," he smiled wide. "You weigh more than you look."

"You certainly know how to flatter a girl. You can put me down now."

He did so carefully, as though she were fragile.

"I can't take these any more." She placed her hand on his shoulder for balance while she removed each dainty shoe. With the sandals in her hand, she was now at least three inches shorter than him. Her feet and calves ached with relief. "I'm parked that way," she pointed as they moved out the doors. "What do you do for a living?"

"Greta said not to tell you."

She had to take two steps to his one, but she'd parked in short-term, just to the right of the terminal entrance. "Why not?"

"Ask your sister."

"Are you an actor?" She pointed at the white Chevy dual-axle pickup she'd squeezed into a parking slot. "That's it."

"That big truck is yours?"

She unlocked the passenger door for him. At the driver's side, she dropped the delicate sandals behind the seat and pulled on her boots, the brown leather scratched, the turquoise uppers somewhat worn. He tossed his duffel and jacket to the backseat, and propped his new boots on the hammer, pliers, cutters and ropes Kate had forgotten to remove from the floor of the cab.

When she turned the key, the stereo came to life, Beethoven's Third Symphony vibrating the door speakers. She lowered the volume as she eased the dually out of the narrow parking space, the diesel engine rattling.

"You can tell me." She pulled up to pay the parking fee. "It can't be as bad as Greta's boyfriend. He's a pitcher. Plays baseball for a living, can you believe that?"

"I know," he answered, his smile wry. "We're on the same team."

Chapter Two

Clayton decided the countryside two hours north of Austin resembled the location setting of a western movie. The low hills were covered with scrub brush, yellow grass, and red rocks. He could see for miles. Other than a ranch they'd passed by about a mile back, there was no sign of civilization. The sun leaned heavily in the west, fat and orange, then sank without fanfare.

He followed Kate on foot, from the road into an area that looked like an overgrown golf course, thick green grass a foot tall, soft and dense as carpeting. It was as unreal in the surrounding landscape as the artificial grass in their new stadium in San Antonio.

"Irrigated," Kate said, throwing it back over her shoulder as though he'd asked.

She walked a lot faster in her cowboy boots than she had in the high heels, the tops of the boots turquoise blue, stopping just below her knees. The short black dress hugged her thighs. Somehow the combination of boots and dress appealed to him, her legs pale and muscular. She stopped at a rusted gate, then set her hand on a slender hip cocked sideways when she shifted her weight.

"Well, sure," she said, in the direction of a rusted chain, and a padlock that shone in the last light of day. "It would be great to have the key handy."

"What do you need help with?" he asked.

"Hang on a second."

She trotted back to her pickup parked in the middle of the

narrow dirt road. On the other side of the gate from him, there were horses, a lot of them. They stared at him with bright eyes, their ears swinging forward, then back. A few had bolted as soon as they approached, but the horses had circled and stood toward the rear of the herd, snorting. Several pawed the dirt, shaking their heads. The barbed wire fence and gate was the dividing line between the ocean of green, and the bare dirt and rock enclosure in which the horses stood.

Kate was pulling on leather gloves when she rejoined him. She'd brought a pair of fence cutters. Stepping to the right of the gate, she set the cutters on the first of five barbed wires just to the side of the post, twisting the handles in her hands as she squeezed. The wire gave with a snap, zinging back toward the fence. The horses jumped backwards as though of one mind, then tentatively moved ahead again.

"Easy, now," she said, and set the cutters on the second wire.

"Allow me."

She glanced his way, then handed the tool to him. He placed the cutters on the wire; she held on with her gloved hand next to the tool so the wire wouldn't snap back. It was harder to cut than he'd expected, but this time the noise was a dull click when the wire separated.

"We should go get the key. You'll have to patch this."

"I patch fences nearly every day of my life."

He cut the remaining wires, then watched as she walked the section of fence back upon itself. She nodded for him to follow as she stepped through the eight-foot gap.

"They won't run us over, will they?"

"Only if you don't come with me."

He followed her. She stepped along the fence, then angled behind the herd. Now he had to watch where he walked. There were cactus clumps one- and two-feet tall, angular red rocks, and small stones that crunched under his boots.

"Why do you keep them closed up like this, just across from all that grass?"

"This isn't my land."

He stopped. "I thought that was your fence. You said you didn't have the key with you."

"It's my neighbor's," she said. "You'd better stick close."

She circled the herd and he followed, a sinking dread settling in at her words. She wasn't paying any attention to him now, moving several paces quietly behind the group of fifty or more horses.

"See her?" She barely nodded her head and didn't raise her arm to point. "The white one?"

The horse she indicated was in front of the rest, its eyes dark.

"That's the lead mare," she continued, her voice soft. "In any wild herd, a mare's always first. The stallion brings up the rear. Then in back there," she again didn't point, "the young and old studs follow along. They're safe from predators, and the stallion, as long as they keep a respectful distance."

"These are wild horses?" he asked.

"They came out of northern New Mexico, part of the Isabella herd. Their lineage traces to Spanish royalty."

They didn't look like royal horses. More like stray dogs, with thick hair hanging over their eyes, tails knotted with grass and sticks. The shaggy horses dipped their heads when they passed through the opening in the fence. They moved eagerly into the sea of deep green rye grass, reaching with eager lips.

"Oh no," she said. "They aren't all here."

She started forward, but then abruptly stopped and cursed. The light of day was fading fast, but Clayton could see Kate was standing in a clump of barrel cactus. He moved to help her, but she backed into him.

"Sorry." He set his hand on her shoulder, his fingers settling on warm, soft skin. He thought she would move away, but instead she stilled, then leaned back against him. She lay her head on his shoulder, next to his cheek, and her hair smelled like apples. Her body fit neatly against his, as though it were the most natural thing in the world that they should stand so close. He didn't move, as long seconds passed. The orange sky dimmed, and the horses stepped. Chickadees and killdeers rallied in the mesquite along the road.

What would happen if he turned her toward him? He wanted more--What, he wasn't sure. A kiss, certainly. He tightened his fingers subtly on her shoulder, his breath held. But it was then Kate patted his hand and stepped sideways, although she didn't look back when she moved away.

The last few horses trailing through were in poor health. Ribs

showed prominently and their coats didn't shine like the others. A brown horse limped on her back leg, throwing her head high to compensate with every step.

"What's the matter with it?" he asked, trying to keep up.

"She broke that leg three weeks ago," Kate said. "It'll be another five before it's really healed."

"I thought you had to put a horse down if it broke a leg."

"No," she answered. "That's just baseball players."

He smiled at her quick delivery. She was sharp, and just as bright as her sister, but she seemed simpler than Greta. More down to earth. Greta's humor was sarcastic, and a bit jaded. Exactly the kind of woman his friend Ryan liked, world-wise and a bit too concerned about appearances. Usually his friend's relationships didn't last long, but Clayton had learned just how serious Ryan was two days ago, when Ryan had shown him the engagement ring.

He stopped now, staring with wonder. Kate did things a woman shouldn't do in a dress. She climbed the rusted gate and threw her leg over the top to hold herself upright, her lean legs leading up to...whatever he cared to see if he moved a bit closer. Propriety told him to stay back, but he ignored it, his heart quickening again. He hadn't been anywhere near a woman in over a year, had not even been tempted, but with Kate, he was having a difficult time keeping any distance at all.

"Forty. At least forty are gone." She jumped down, then walked off into the herd of horses. They were big enough to crush her, to kick or bite. Two more steps and she was gone.

Around him there was nothing but rocks, and dirt. Stars began to appear above. There was no traffic on the little road, no airplanes flew overhead. He wasn't a total novice outdoors, he'd been raised on a dead-end street, with open fields where kids had come together for touch football, and of course, baseball. But he'd never seen so much empty land. They might just as well be on the moon.

He went in search of Kate, giving the horses a wide berth. She was headed toward the truck, moving slowly. When he caught up to her, he saw she was wiping her eyes.

"What's wrong?" He offered her the folded handkerchief from his back pocket.

"They haul them across the border," she said. "The horses are

butchered in Mexico. There's an old black stud that's been taking care of the mare with the broken leg, but Joe's gone. She would've been slower than him, but he must've moved her off....Once they slaughter them," her voice hardened, "the meat's shipped to France because there, horse meat's a delicacy."

It was called *viande chevaline*. His former wife had translated menus for him with just a hint of superiority, her black hair cropped short. She'd preferred the meat as a steak in blood red au jus.

"People think they're dumb animals," Kate said. "What goes on down there in the slaughter houses is horrid. I've seen it, heard it. They scream."

She turned away from him, her eyes shining before she pressed the handkerchief to staunch the tears. He wanted to enfold her in his arms, hold her, but she might take it the wrong way, as something more than comfort. Instead he reached to touch her shoulder again, but he paused when he saw lights, at the point where the sun had just set, where the road came over the rise. Headlights grew brighter as the car approached.

Remote areas of Texas, Clayton saw, could afford brand new patrol cars. *Sheriff* was detailed garishly down the side of the white sedan in letters ten inches tall.

Kate said, "You might want to hide those cutters."

"Why?"

The car rolled toward them; it didn't seem wise to wait for an answer. He tossed the tool inside her truck, then grabbed his phone and jacket. When he returned, he found Kate leaning against the car's fender. Her arms were crossed tightly, but she was laughing. The deputy stood behind his open door, smiling wide.

Clayton held up his jacket for her, draping it over her shoulders when she turned.

"Thanks," she said. "It cools down fast out here. Clayton, this is Deputy Billy Fenton. Billy, Clayton Williams. San Antonio Mustangs."

"No shit? Uh--Excuse me, ma'am." The deputy shook hands with Clayton, his grin wide beneath a white straw cowboy hat perched high on his head, as though the hat was too small. He stood taller than Clayton, had to be nearly six-five, plus the hat. He seemed barely old enough to have facial hair. "Mr. Williams, I've been watching you

play since I was a little kid."

Clayton didn't bother with the smile he reserved for fans, when he heard what was easily one of his least favorite comments. What kind of response did they expect? The sports reporters knew what they were doing: *When are you going to retire?*

"He's here to film a commercial for Western Swing," Kate told the deputy.

The officer frowned. "I thought they only used cowboys."

"Mr. Williams actually is very good on a horse," Kate announced. "He's here a couple days early to help Judge and Edie work their cows."

She'd said it so well and so smoothly Clayton almost believed her himself, although he'd never worked a cow in his life, whatever that meant.

The deputy said, "Excuse me," and raised the mic he held in his left hand. He spoke into it and then listened to the response.

Clayton couldn't make it out, the static crackling along with a deep baritone voice. He thought he heard *trespassing*, and something about *destruction*. The only word he heard clearly was *Anderson*.

"Kate, what's going on?"

She was still smiling, though she clutched the handkerchief tightly, his leather coat dwarfing her small shoulders. "We'll find out--" She glanced sideways when the deputy leaned inside to hook the mic up, then straightened.

"I'm afraid I need you to come with me," the deputy said, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"Want me to follow you in my truck?" she asked.

"Naw, you gotta ride in the car." He opened the back door and indicated Kate should get in.

"Where're you taking her?" Clayton asked.

"You, too, Mr. Williams. I'm sorry."

"What's going on?" he asked again, looking from Kate's wide smile to the deputy's apologetic frown. By now it was dark, the only shadows cast by the car's interior light, and the headlights that illuminated the tailgate of Kate's pickup.

"Go ahead and give him that list," Kate said.

"I don't know why he's bringing charges against you," the deputy said to her. "I thought you and him--"

"Stuart has a strange sense of honor," she interrupted. "Give Clayton the list, would you, please?"

"Trespassing, destruction of property, and felony mischief."

Clayton stared, as the anger slowly began to build. Her nonchalance and the deputy's familiarity were annoying, as though they were together in on some secret they refused to share. He'd never gotten so much as a parking ticket and yet it sounded like they were being arrested.

"Please, sir. If you'd get in, I'll explain on the way."

"C'mon, Clayton," Kate said. "We don't want to give Billy a hard time. He's just doing his job." She disappeared inside the dark interior of the back seat.

Clayton asked, "Who's bringing charges?"

The deputy didn't answer, his childlike features hardening, mouth set.

Clayton was suddenly aware the officer wore a sidearm on his belt. Youth didn't belie the fact that he was in charge of the impossible situation.

"All right, all right." He slid in beside Kate and the deputy closed the door after him. The interior was too warm and smelled vaguely of food, maybe fries and a burger. The aroma reminded Clayton he hadn't eaten for hours.

In the front seat, the deputy sat behind the wheel, his neat buzz cut visible now that he'd removed the hat. The officer fastened his seatbelt, then swung the car toward the bushes at the edge of the road to make a U-turn. Grass and weeds brushed along the underside of the car as the headlights arced across the mustangs grazing in the tall grass. Then they were again on the road, and headed back the way they'd come.

The deputy spoke briefly into the mic as the car picked up speed. Clayton could see the headlights illuminating the dirt road, pushing against the darkness. Outside the window to his left, the night seemed without end.

"I want an explanation," he said to Kate. She sat to his right, no more than a foot of space between them.

She was no longer smiling. Her mouth was pulled into a thin line, like it had been at the airport when she'd learned her sister wasn't coming. Hurt and dismay had passed briefly across her face before

she'd buried her disappointment.

"Stuart Anderson is having us arrested for cutting the fence."

What she said was irrational. Clayton could feel his brows pulled together as confusion roiled through. "That doesn't make sense. He's the--Stuart Anderson owns my team. What does he have to do with anything?"

Kate's eyes narrowed. "I've known Stuart for years."

"The owner of my team?"

"He bought the land next to mine," she said, "and we've been having a disagreement about the wild horses. You're a casualty of circumstance, Clayton. Wrong place at the wrong time."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt of *PROOF OF WORTH*.
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