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Summer in Fort Worth

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CHAPTER ONE: Heatwave at Sundance Square

The heat in Fort Worth wasn't just a weather condition; it was a physical presence, a heavy, invisible blanket that wrapped itself around the city and refused to let go. By mid-June, the North Texas sun had turned the red-brick streets of downtown into a shimmering griddle. Wyatt McCall leaned against the cool granite edge of a planter in Sundance Square, watching the steam rise from the pavement where the fountain's spray had dared to stray. He adjusted his Stetson, the felt brim offering a small sanctuary of shade, but even the shadows felt warm. He was a man who usually preferred the open range and the predictable rhythms of a ranch, but today, the city had called him in for a meeting he couldn't avoid.

The plaza was uncharacteristically quiet for a weekday afternoon. Most sensible people were tucked away in the air-conditioned caves of the surrounding skyscrapers or nursing iced coffees in the various bistros that lined the square. Wyatt checked his watch—a rugged, scratched piece of hardware that had seen more grease and dirt than most people saw in a lifetime. He was ten minutes early, a habit drummed into him by a father who believed that being on time was the same as being late. He scanned the area, his eyes settling on the giant umbrellas that looked like white mushrooms sprouted from the concrete. Underneath them, the jumbotron flickered with news of the day, but Wyatt wasn't interested in the world outside Tarrant County.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his temple with the back of a calloused hand. He felt out of place in his starched jeans and button-down shirt, surrounded by the polished glass of the Bass Performance Hall and the upscale boutiques. He was a creature of the dirt and the grass, a man who understood the language of cattle and the temperament of a spirited horse. Downtown Fort Worth, for all its "Cowtown" branding, often felt like a stage set to him—a beautiful, well-maintained homage to a way of life that he actually lived every single day. He looked at the Chisholm Trail mural on the side of the Jett Building, the painted longhorns frozen in a perpetual drive, and felt a pang of kinship with the dusty figures depicted there.

That was when he saw her. She didn't come from the direction of the parking garages or the office towers. She appeared near the fountains, walking with a purpose that seemed to defy the oppressive humidity. She wasn't dressed for the heat, or at least, not in the way Wyatt understood it. She wore a light, floral-patterned dress that caught the slight breeze generated by the falling water, and her hair—a deep, honeyed brunette—was pulled back in a messy bun that looked effortlessly chic. She was carrying a leather portfolio and a large camera bag slung over one shoulder, her eyes darting around the square as if she were looking for a specific angle, a specific light that no one else could see.

Wyatt watched her for a moment, captivated by the way she moved. She didn't have the lethargic slump of the other pedestrians. There was a vibrancy to her, a spark that the Texas sun couldn't dull. She stopped near the center of the plaza, where the vertical jets of water shot up from the ground in a rhythmic dance. A group of children were running through the spray, screaming with delight as the cool water hit their skin. The woman smiled, a genuine, wide expression that reached her eyes, and she quickly hoisted her camera to her face. She began clicking away, capturing the joy of the children against the backdrop of the towering buildings.

He realized he was staring, which wasn't polite, but there was something about the way she looked through that lens that made him curious. She wasn't just taking pictures; she was hunting for a story. Wyatt stood up, stretching his long legs, and felt the familiar ache in his lower back from a fall he'd taken off a fence two weeks prior. He started to walk toward the coffee shop where his meeting was supposed to take place, but his path intersected with hers. As fate, or perhaps just the slickness of a stray puddle, would have it, a small boy chased his sister directly into the woman's path.

She stepped back to avoid the collision, her heel catching on the edge of a paving stone. For a second, time seemed to slow down—the kind of slow motion Wyatt usually associated with being thrown from a bull. The camera bag started to slide off her shoulder, and she began to tip backward. Wyatt didn't think; he just moved. He covered the distance in three long strides and caught her by the elbow, his other hand reaching out to steady the heavy camera bag before it could hit the bricks. She gasped, her breath warm against his chest as she righted herself, her wide eyes looking up into his.

"Easy there," Wyatt said, his voice a low, gravelly drawl that sounded like the very earth she had almost hit. He didn't let go immediately, making sure she had her balance. Her skin was warm, and she smelled like citrus and something vaguely like expensive paper. Up close, he could see the fine spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose and the intense green of her irises. She looked startled, but not afraid. She took a deep breath, clutching her portfolio to her chest, and offered him a sheepish, grateful smile that made his pulse do a strange little skip-hop in his chest.

"Thank you," she panted, her voice having a slight melodic lilt that didn't sound like it originated in Texas. "I think the heat is finally getting to my brain. Or maybe I'm just clumsy. It's usually a bit of both." She adjusted the strap of her camera bag, her fingers brushing against his hand as she reclaimed her property. Wyatt stepped back, giving her space, but he didn't walk away. There was an energy between them that felt more intense than the triple-digit temperature. He tipped his hat to her, a gesture that felt ancient and necessary in that moment.

"The bricks get slick around the fountains," Wyatt remarked, nodding toward the water. "And those kids don't have much of a braking system. You okay?" He looked her over, checking for any signs of a twisted ankle. She nodded, her smile widening as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She seemed to be taking him in too—his dusty boots, his worn belt buckle, the Wayfarer sunglasses hooked into his shirt collar. He felt suddenly very aware of the fact that he hadn't bothered to polish his boots before coming into the city.

"I'm fine, really. Just a bit rattled," she said. She held out a hand, a gesture of formality that felt surprisingly natural. "I'm Callie. Callie Thorne. I'm guessing you're not a tourist." Wyatt took her hand, his large, rough palm swallowing her smaller one. Her grip was firm, the grip of someone who worked for a living, even if that work involved shutters and lenses rather than ropes and brands. He liked that. He liked that she didn't pull away immediately, her gaze steady and inquisitive.

"Wyatt McCall," he replied. "And no, ma'am, not a tourist. Just a man with a bad habit of coming into town when the weather's trying to kill us all. You new to Fort Worth? You don't sound like you've been breathing this dust for very long." He leaned back slightly, shifting his weight. He had a meeting to get to, a lawyer waiting to talk to him about water rights and property lines, but the lawyer could wait. The lawyer was paid by the hour, and Callie Thorne was a far more interesting prospect than a discussion about the Trinity River Basin.

Callie laughed, a short, bright sound that cut through the heavy air. "Is it that obvious? I moved here three weeks ago from Chicago. I'm a photojournalist. I took a job with a local magazine to do a 'Summer in the City' series. I thought I knew what heat was, but I was wrong. Chicago is a breeze; this is a furnace." She looked around the square, her expression a mix of awe and exhaustion. "I wanted to capture the heart of the city, but so far, all I've captured is a lot of people looking very, very sweaty."

"Well, you've picked a hell of a day for it," Wyatt said with a grin. "Sundance Square is the pretty face of the city, but if you want the heart, you're looking in the wrong direction. This place is for the lawyers and the theater-goers. The heart's a bit further north, where the smell of manure is stronger than the smell of espresso." He gestured vaguely toward the Stockyards, though he knew she couldn't see them from here. He saw her eyes light up at the mention of a better story. She was clearly a woman who followed the scent of a good lead.

"The Stockyards," she whispered, as if the word itself held a certain magic. "I have that on my list for next week. Everyone keeps telling me it's a 'must-see,' but I was worried it might be a bit too... touristy? I want the real Texas, Wyatt. Not the gift shop version." She looked at him then, really looked at him, and he realized he was exactly the kind of 'real Texas' she was searching for. He felt a bit like a specimen under a microscope, but he didn't mind it as much as he thought he would. There was a

sincerity in her voice that made him want to help her.

"The Stockyards can be a circus, sure," Wyatt admitted, rubbing his jaw. "But there's truth there if you know where to stand. If you're looking for the real deal, you have to look past the souvenir stands and the staged shootouts. It's in the way a man holds a horse or the way the dust settles on a pair of boots after a long day. It's not always pretty, but it's honest." He found himself talking more than he usually did. Normally, he was a man of few words, preferring the silence of the ranch, but Callie had a way of drawing him out without even trying.

She opened her portfolio and pulled out a small notepad, scribbling something down. "Honesty," she muttered. "I like that. That's what I'm looking for. Everything in the city feels so... manicured lately. I need some grit." She looked back up at him, her green eyes sparkling with a new intensity. "Maybe you could give me some pointers? Since you seem to know your way around the grit." It was a bold request, one that might have felt like a come-on if she weren't so clearly focused on her work. Wyatt felt a tug of admiration for her directness.

Before he could answer, the bells of a nearby clock tower chimed, reminding him of the time. He cursed under his breath, realizing he was now five minutes late for his meeting. He looked at Callie, then at the coffee shop, and then back at her. He didn't want the conversation to end, but he was a man of his word, and he'd promised to meet the attorney. "I'd like that," he said, and he meant it. "But I've got a man waiting to talk to me about a very boring piece of land. Tell you what, I'm usually around the Stockyards on Friday afternoons. There's a place called the White Elephant. If you're there around four, I'll buy you a beer and tell you where the best light is."

Callie's face brightened, a look of genuine surprise crossing her features. "The White Elephant. I've heard of it. It's a deal, Wyatt McCall. Don't stand me up, or I'll have to find you and take embarrassing photos of you until you apologize." She offered him a playful wink, one that sent a jolt of heat through him that had nothing to do with the sun. She began to pack her camera back into her bag, her movements efficient and practiced. He watched her for a second more, memorizing the way she stood, before he forced himself to turn away.

"I don't break my word," he called back over his shoulder. He started walking toward the coffee shop, his boots clicking rhythmically against the bricks. He felt lighter than he had all day, the heavy heat of Fort Worth suddenly feeling less like a burden and more like an atmosphere. He reached the door of the cafe, the blast of cold air from the interior hitting him like a physical shock, but his thoughts remained out in the square, in the sun, with the girl who was looking for the heart of the city. He checked his reflection in the glass door, adjusted his hat, and stepped inside.

The meeting was every bit as tedious as he had expected. Lawyer Henderson was a

man who loved the sound of his own voice and the precision of a well-placed comma. They sat in a corner booth, surrounded by the hum of espresso machines and the hushed tones of other business deals. Wyatt sat through two hours of talk about riparian rights, historical boundaries, and the rising cost of irrigation. He nodded in all the right places, signed three different documents, and drank two cups of black coffee that tasted like burnt beans. But his mind was miles away, or rather, just a few yards away, wondering if Callie was still out there.

When he finally emerged from the building, the afternoon had transitioned into that golden hour where the light turns soft and honey-colored. The extreme edge of the heat had dulled, replaced by a warm, heavy evening glow. Sundance Square was busier now; the after-work crowd was beginning to fill the outdoor seating areas, and the sound of live music began to drift from a nearby stage. Wyatt walked back to where he'd met Callie, but she was long gone. The fountains were still dancing, and the children had been replaced by couples walking hand-in-hand, but the spot felt strangely empty to him.

He walked to the parking garage, his mind turning over the encounter. He wasn't the kind of man who went looking for romance, especially not with a city girl who probably didn't know a heifer from a steer. He'd had his share of heartbreaks and complications, and he'd decided a long time ago that his life was better suited for the solitude of the ranch. But there was something about Callie—a curiosity, a fearlessness—that had piqued his interest. She was looking for the "real" Texas, and he found himself wanting to be the one to show it to her.

Driving out of downtown, the skyline of Fort Worth rose up in his rearview mirror. The glass towers of the City Center and the distinctive clock tower of the courthouse were silhouetted against a sky that was turning a bruised purple and orange. As he hit the highway, heading north toward the outskirts where the land began to open up, he rolled down his windows. The wind was hot and smelled of exhaust and dry grass, but he didn't mind. He was thinking about Friday. He was thinking about the White Elephant, the smell of sawdust, and the green eyes of a girl who wasn't afraid of a little grit.

Back at his ranch, the quiet was absolute. The only sounds were the crickets in the tall grass and the occasional lowing of a cow in the distance. He sat on his porch for a long time, watching the stars begin to poke through the Texas sky. It was a vast, unforgiving landscape, but it was home. He thought about Callie's camera, wondering what she had seen through that lens today. Had she seen the beauty he saw, or just the harshness? Fort Worth was a city of contradictions—modern and traditional, wealthy and rugged, hot as hell and yet somehow inviting. He realized he wanted to see his world through her eyes, if only for a little while.

He went inside and tossed his hat on the rack, the familiar scent of leather and cedar

filling his senses. He looked at the calendar on the wall, a simple thing with pictures of old tractors. Friday was only two days away. Usually, he dreaded his trips into the city, the traffic and the noise wearing on his nerves. But as he turned off the lights and climbed into bed, listening to the hum of the ceiling fan overhead, he found himself looking forward to it. The heatwave was supposed to continue through the weekend, the meteorologists promising record-breaking temperatures. But for the first time in years, Wyatt McCall didn't mind the heat. In fact, he was starting to think that this might be the most interesting summer Fort Worth had seen in a long time.

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CHAPTER TWO: The Girl in the Stockyards

Callie Thorne spent the next two days in a creative haze, fueled by iced coffee and a newfound excitement for her "Summer in the City" series. The encounter with Wyatt McCall had thrown a wrench into her carefully planned schedule, but it was a welcome disruption. She'd already captured the polished facade of Sundance Square – the gleaming glass, the manicured flowerbeds, the families enjoying the fountains. It was beautiful, undeniably, but it lacked the raw, unvarnished truth she craved. Wyatt, with his weathered hands and the scent of earth clinging to him, was a living embodiment of that truth.

She had spent Wednesday and Thursday pouring over maps of Fort Worth, specifically zooming in on the Stockyards National Historic District. Her editor at *Texas Living Monthly* had given her a loose brief: capture the essence of a Fort Worth summer. Callie had initially envisioned bright, sun-drenched images of urban life, farmers markets, and outdoor concerts. But Wyatt's words, "The heart's a bit further north, where the smell of manure is stronger than the smell of espresso," echoed in her mind. He was right; she needed to get closer to the grit.

On Friday afternoon, the heat was a tangible entity, pressing down on the city with a force that made the air shimmer above the asphalt. Despite the oppressive temperature, a nervous energy pulsed through Callie. She meticulously packed her camera bag, making sure her most versatile lenses were easily accessible. She chose a practical outfit: lightweight jeans, a simple cotton t-shirt, and sturdy ankle boots. Comfort and mobility were paramount today, especially if Wyatt's "grit" involved more than just picturesque dust. She tied her hair back in a braid, determined to keep it out of her face.

The drive to the Stockyards was a journey through different layers of Fort Worth. The sleek modernity of downtown gradually gave way to older, more industrial areas, then finally to the distinctive brick and limestone architecture of the historic district. As she neared her destination, the scent of hay, dust, and something undeniably bovine drifted through her open car window. It was a smell that was alien to her urban sensibilities, yet strangely compelling. It promised authenticity, a stark contrast to the perfumed air of Chicago's Magnificent Mile.

She found parking a few blocks away from the main drag, wanting to walk in and absorb the atmosphere. Stepping out of her air-conditioned car was like walking into a blast furnace. The sun beat down relentlessly, baking the brick sidewalks. But the heat didn't deter the crowds. Families with strollers, tourists in bright t-shirts, and local cowboys in worn hats milled about, creating a vibrant, bustling scene. This wasn't just

a historical monument; it was a living, breathing part of the city.

Callie began to walk, her camera already out and at the ready. She captured the iconic Stockyards sign, the old brick buildings with their distinctive arched windows, and the colorful storefronts selling everything from cowboy boots to Texas-shaped souvenirs. She focused on the details: the intricate stitching on a pair of leather boots in a shop window, the weathered face of an old cowboy sitting on a bench, the playful antics of a longhorn sculpture. She was searching for the "truth" Wyatt had spoken of, trying to see beyond the obvious tourist traps.

The sound of country music, live and twangy, drifted from a saloon, mixing with the distant lowing of cattle. Children chased pigeons in the dusty plaza, their laughter echoing against the brick. Callie felt a sense of excitement build within her. This was exactly what she had hoped to find: a place steeped in history, yet alive with contemporary energy. It was rough around the edges, genuine, and full of stories waiting to be told.

She checked her watch. It was just past three o'clock. She still had an hour before she was supposed to meet Wyatt at the White Elephant Saloon. She decided to explore the corrals first, hoping to catch some of the wranglers preparing for the famous cattle drive. The air inside the barns was cooler, thick with the scent of hay and livestock. Longhorns, magnificent beasts with impressive horns, stood placidly in their pens, oblivious to the cameras flashing around them. Callie focused her lens, capturing the texture of their hides, the gentle blink of their eyes.

As she moved through the pens, she noticed a group of cowboys preparing their horses. The men moved with an economy of motion that spoke of years of practice, their hands deftly handling saddles and bridles. There was a quiet intensity to their work, a respectful interaction between man and animal. This was the "real Texas" Wyatt had promised. Callie felt a surge of creative inspiration, her fingers flying over the camera controls, capturing every nuance of their movements, every detail of their weathered gear.

She was so engrossed in her photography that she almost missed the approaching commotion. A group of excited tourists had gathered near one of the larger corrals, pointing and exclaiming. Callie adjusted her camera strap and moved closer, curious. A young cowboy, no older than twenty, was attempting to rope a calf. He was good, but the calf was quick, darting and weaving with surprising agility. The crowd cheered him on, and Callie found herself smiling, caught up in the energy of the moment.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the hubbub, a deep, resonant sound that made Callie's head snap up. "Son, you're chasing him too much. Let the rope do the work, not your legs." Wyatt McCall stood leaning against the wooden fence, a familiar Stetson shading his eyes, a slight grin playing on his lips. He wore a simple plaid shirt and

jeans, looking perfectly at home amidst the dust and the cattle. His presence felt like a grounding force in the chaotic energy of the Stockyards.

The young cowboy, looking a bit sheepish, nodded and tried again, this time with more patience. Within a few throws, he had successfully roped the calf, securing it with practiced ease. The crowd applauded, and Wyatt gave a nod of approval. He then turned his head, and his eyes, still shaded by his hat, landed on Callie. A slow smile spread across his face, lighting up his features. It wasn't just polite; it was genuinely pleased to see her.

"Callie Thorne, I presume?" he said, pushing himself off the fence and walking toward her. His stride was confident, unhurried, even in the crowded space. "You found your way to the grit, I see."

Callie felt a familiar skip in her pulse. Up close, he was even more striking than she remembered. His eyes were a clear, startling blue, crinkled at the corners from years spent squinting into the sun. "Wyatt McCall," she replied, a little breathlessly. "You're a hard man to miss in a place like this. Though, I was enjoying watching you give impromptu roping lessons."

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound. "Just helping a boy learn the ropes, literally. You got here a bit early. Most folks don't start drifting into the saloons until closer to five." He gestured toward her camera, which was still clutched in her hand. "Looks like you're making good use of the time, though."

"I am," she confirmed, feeling a warmth spread through her cheeks. "This place is incredible, Wyatt. It's exactly what I was looking for. There's so much life here, so many stories." She swept her hand around, taking in the bustling scene. "I've been trying to capture the feeling of it."

"And what feeling is that, exactly?" he asked, his gaze steady and curious. He leaned against a nearby post, his arms crossed over his chest, making her feel as though she had his complete, undivided attention.

Callie thought for a moment, trying to articulate the complex emotions swirling within her. "It's... resilience. And pride. And a deep connection to something older, something authentic. It's not trying to be anything it's not. It just *is*." She looked at him, realizing he embodied much of what she was trying to describe.

Wyatt nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You've got a good eye, Callie. Most folks just see the gift shops and the photo ops. You're looking deeper. That's a good quality for a photojournalist." He pushed off the post. "Come on, the White Elephant's just down the street. We can grab that beer, and I'll point you toward some of the quieter spots, the places where the real work gets done."

As they walked side by side, Callie felt a comfortable rhythm develop between them. Wyatt's presence was reassuring, like a steady hand. He pointed out various landmarks, sharing snippets of history and personal anecdotes that brought the buildings to life. "See that old brick building there? Used to be the hog and sheep pens. Now it's an event space, but if you listen close, you can still hear the ghosts of a thousand squeals." He grinned at her, and Callie laughed, appreciating his dry wit.

They reached the White Elephant Saloon, a legendary Fort Worth establishment with a reputation for strong drinks and lively crowds. The double doors swung open, revealing a dimly lit interior filled with the chatter of voices, the clinking of glasses, and the unmistakable scent of stale beer and sawdust. A worn wooden bar stretched across one wall, and cowboy hats dotted the heads of most patrons. It was exactly as Callie had imagined a proper Texas saloon would be.

Wyatt led her to a small, relatively quiet booth in the back, away from the main hubbub. He ordered two longneck beers, and Callie watched as he effortlessly navigated the crowded space, exchanging nods and greetings with several men at the bar. He was clearly a known and respected figure here, a part of the fabric of the Stockyards.

When he returned, setting the cold bottles on the table, Callie took a long, grateful swallow. The beer was crisp and refreshing, a perfect antidote to the oppressive heat. "This is exactly what I needed," she said, leaning back against the worn red upholstery of the booth. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," Wyatt replied, taking a sip of his own beer. He leaned forward slightly, his blue eyes fixed on her. "So, you said you're working on a 'Summer in the City' series. What else have you captured besides the sweat?"

Callie pulled out her small notepad and flipped to a fresh page. "Well, Sundance Square, obviously. And I did a piece on the Trinity Trails - lots of people running, biking, kayaking. I spent a morning at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden, trying to find some shade among the roses. And I've got plans for Joe T. Garcia's, the Cultural District, and of course, the rodeo when it comes around." She looked up at him. "But this, this feels different. More important somehow."

"The Stockyards *are* important," Wyatt confirmed, his voice serious now. "They're a reminder of where this city came from. Before there was oil, before there were planes, there were cattle. This was the hub, the place where fortunes were made and lost, where the West was won, one steer at a time." He paused, his gaze drifting around the saloon. "It's in the bones of Fort Worth, you know? Even if some folks forget it."

"I don't want to forget it," Callie said earnestly. "I want to show people. But how do you

capture that - the history, the spirit - without making it feel like a museum exhibit? How do you make it feel alive?"

Wyatt considered her question, taking another slow sip of his beer. "You look for the quiet moments, I reckon. The moments when people aren't posing for a picture. Like that young buck trying to rope the calf. Or the way a cowboy talks to his horse. Or the hands of a saddle maker, worn smooth from years of working leather. Those are the stories." He leaned across the table, his voice dropping slightly. "And if you want to find some of those stories, you might need to get up before the sun. Before the tour buses arrive."

Callie's eyes widened. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting, Wyatt McCall?" she asked, a thrill of anticipation running through her.

He gave her a knowing smile. "If you want to see the real workings of a cattle operation, before the tourists turn up, you've got to be willing to get a little dirty. There are still working ranches and holding pens just outside the main tourist area. That's where you'll find the quiet moments. The honest ones." He paused. "And I happen to know a few folks who wouldn't mind a dedicated photographer documenting their day, so long as you're not in the way."

The offer was exactly what Callie had been hoping for, even if she hadn't dared to voice it. It was an invitation not just into the heart of the Stockyards, but into Wyatt's world. "I would love that, Wyatt," she said, her voice filled with genuine enthusiasm. "Absolutely. Just tell me when and where. I'm not afraid of a little dirt."

"Good," he said, his smile widening, and Callie felt a flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with the heat or the beer. "I'm out there most mornings, checking on my own herd, sometimes helping out friends. We could meet up early next week. Maybe Tuesday? Say, five-thirty AM?"

Callie blinked. Five-thirty AM. That was practically the middle of the night for a city dweller, especially one used to late-night editing sessions. But the thought of capturing the Stockyards coming to life, with Wyatt as her guide, was too tempting to resist. "Five-thirty AM, Tuesday," she confirmed, pulling out her phone to set an alarm. "I'll be there. Don't worry, I come with my own coffee."

They spent the next hour talking, Wyatt sharing more stories about the Stockyards, about his ranch, and about growing up in Fort Worth. Callie told him about her life in Chicago, her passion for photography, and why she felt drawn to the authenticity of Texas. She found herself opening up to him in a way she rarely did with strangers. There was a directness to Wyatt, an unpretentious honesty, that made it easy to talk. He listened attentively, his blue eyes never leaving her face, making her feel truly seen.

As the sun began to dip lower, casting long shadows across the saloon, the White Elephant grew even more crowded and boisterous. Wyatt checked his watch. "I should probably head out soon. Got some early morning chores, as you now know." He stood up, and Callie followed suit, feeling a pang of reluctance for the conversation to end.

"Thank you for the beer, Wyatt," she said, gathering her camera bag. "And for the tour. And for the promise of an early morning adventure." She met his gaze, a genuine smile on her face. "I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure, Callie," he replied, his voice a warm rumble. "It'll be good to have someone around who appreciates the real work. See you Tuesday." He gave a slight nod, a silent promise, and then he turned and began to navigate his way through the throng of people, his broad shoulders easily parting the crowd.

Callie watched him go, feeling a mix of anticipation and something she couldn't quite name. She had come to Fort Worth seeking stories, and it seemed she had found one, not just in the historic streets, but in the cowboy who walked them. She stepped out of the saloon, the evening air still warm but now carrying the promise of a cooler night. The neon lights of the Stockyards glowed against the darkening sky, painting the brick buildings in vibrant hues.

As she drove back towards downtown, the images she had captured that day replayed in her mind: the magnificent longhorns, the patient cowboys, the bustling streets. But most vividly, she saw Wyatt's crinkled blue eyes and the easy smile that transformed his rugged face. She knew, with a certainty that settled deep in her bones, that Tuesday morning wouldn't just be about photography. It would be about getting to know a man who seemed to embody the very essence of the "real Texas" she was so desperately trying to find. The summer in Fort Worth was just beginning, and Callie had a feeling it was going to be far more interesting than she had ever imagined.

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