

**Excerpt from “Falling For Texas” by Jill Lynn.
© Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.**

His sister's skill for getting into trouble would be impressive if it weren't so discouraging.

Cash Maddox's abused leather cowboy boots echoed down the empty school hallway, the smells of industrial cleaner and mildew transporting him back a decade to his own high school days. At least the scents were better than manure, the cologne he most likely boasted after taking off in the middle of ranch work and not leaving enough time for a shower.

Usually he didn't get called into school until a few weeks into the fall semester. But this year? School hadn't even started. Rachel had only been on school property for one day of preseason volleyball practice yesterday, yet Cash had come in last night to find a note scrawled in his housekeeper's handwriting about meeting the new coach after practice today.

He didn't know what Coach Grayson wanted to meet with him about, but if he had to guess, his sister wasn't going to be winning any awards. Unless there was a gold medal for eye rolling or hair tossing. She'd win those faster than an amateur could get bucked off a bull.

But despite the tension that had invaded their house lately and the way Rachel wanted nothing to do with him, Cash loved his little sister. He'd do just about anything to give her the same great upbringing he'd had. He owed her at least that much.

Catching his reflection in the glass trophy case, Cash paused to pick out a much younger version of himself in the old football team photos. He and his best friend, Jack Smith, had that stoic look in the picture, as if smiling meant they weren't tough.

He shook his head and started walking again, remembering parading down these same hallways. Man, he'd been full of himself back then. Not more than any other football player in this town, but still. At least he and Jack had finally grown up. Cash's maturing had come a bit quicker than most, but then, parenting would do that to anyone.

He paused in the doorway to the French room, where his message said to meet.

"You must be Rachel's father. Please come in." Coach Grayson waved, not looking up from working at her desk. "I'm just finishing up some class notes."

Cash opened his mouth to correct her assumption, then clamped his jaw shut at her look of concentration. Warm cocoa hair scooped into a ponytail hung down over one shoulder as Coach Grayson nibbled on her lip.

Jack. Cash wanted to grab an old-fashioned branding iron and lay one on his friend. Jack and Janie Smith were neighbors with the new woman in town, and they'd had her over for dinner on Sunday night. But while Jack had mentioned that his wife and two-year-old son had seemed equally smitten with the new coach, he'd failed to mention that she looked nothing like Coach Pleater—the woman in her sixties who'd retired last year after two decades with the school.

Coach Grayson wore a fitted pink T-shirt and had tiny stud earrings in her earlobes. Athletic and yet still...professional. Right. That was the word he was going for.

Cash settled his long frame into the high school desk across from her and released a pent-up breath. Didn't matter if the woman was the Gillespie County Fair queen. She was off-limits for him.

He removed his hat, scraping a hand through his hair and causing a cloud of dust to settle on his shoulders. Yep. Definitely should have showered.

"Sorry about that. I didn't want to lose that thought for the first week's lesson plan." Coach Grayson set her pen down and looked up, gracing Cash with breath-stealing blue eyes framed by dark lashes and plenty of reasons to escape from the room right now. Like a heart-shaped face, with a chin that jutted out just enough to emphasize the smooth curve of her cheeks and the line of her lips.

Mercy. What was wrong with him? Had he never seen a woman before?

"No problem." At his raspy voice, he cleared his throat and tried again. "You wanted to see me about Rachel?"

Coach Grayson's eyebrows pulled together and she looked down at the front of her shirt—searching for words or embarrassed about her clothing, Cash wasn't sure. He only knew the coach didn't look anywhere near as messy in her volleyball gear as he did in grubby ranch clothes. In fact, she looked pretty cute.

Not that he should be looking.

Cash forced his concentration back to his sister instead of the surprising distraction in front of him. After all, he had a promise to keep and a girl who needed him to keep it.

The rest would have to wait.

So far, Olivia Grayson considered her escape from Colorado a success. In one weekend, she'd managed to move across the country, unpack her apartment, become friends with her new neighbors and fall in love.

If that last one happened to be with Jack and Janie Smith's two-year-old son? All the better. Olivia had no intention of meeting a guy in the sleepy little town of Fredericksburg, Texas.

Which was why she absolutely *did not care* that a head-turning cowboy sat across from her while she wore a coffee-stained T-shirt boasting the lovely smell of a productive day in the gym.

Olivia hadn't thought much of it when she'd pictured meeting Rachel Maddox's father. But if the man in front of her was a parent to the seventeen-year-old blonde on her volleyball team, Olivia would swallow her tongue.

She kind of already had.

"You're Warren Maddox?"

"Actually, I'm Cash." He ran a hand through dark hazelnut hair speckled with a few sun-kissed golden highlights. "Warren's my father's name. Technically I'm Warren C. Maddox, but everyone's called me Cash since I was a kid. Warren is probably listed as my legal name on the parent list. Sorry about that."

Olivia waited for some further explanation, but it didn't come. Huh. Maybe he'd had Rachel at a very young age. Or something.

Was it really her business?

"So, what's my sister done this time?"

"Your sister?"

He nodded. "Suppose you wouldn't know the story, being new and all. Rachel is my younger sister by ten years. Our parents died in a car crash a few years ago and I was old enough to take legal guardianship of her."

That made a lot more sense. Except...what a horrible story. "I'm so sorry." Olivia straightened the stack of papers on her desk, floundering for more appropriate words to express her sympathies. She quickly discarded everything that popped into her mind.

Cash raised a hand. "You don't have to stop talking to me now or analyze everything you say before you say it."

She smiled as his mesmerizing hazel eyes turned playful, the color reminding her of leaves changing in the fall.

"I can't believe you thought I was old enough to be Rachel's father, Coach Grayson. Now that's just offensive."

"I didn't think that."

Her gaze traveled from his T-shirt that sported evidence of a hard day's work, down to his dusty jeans and brown leather boots. The way his legs covered the distance between his chair and her desk, he must be over six foot. Which meant he was taller than her...not that that mattered in the least.

He skimmed a hand over strong cheekbones. "I apologize for my appearance, but I had to come in the middle of ranch work to meet with you."

Had he noticed her perusal? Heat rushed to her cheeks. Dust might permeate the man's appearance, but he definitely didn't need to apologize. He looked far too attractive for his disheveled state.

"I'm sorry for pulling you away from work." She glanced down at her clothes. "And I just came from practice, so I completely understand." Olivia swiped her mouth to check for the presence of any chocolate left from her after-practice snack. With the way she was acting, she'd probably find a bit of drool, too.

"It's not a problem, Coach Grayson. Rachel always comes first."

"Call me Olivia, please." If Rachel came first...did that mean Cash wasn't married? He had to be around her age.

"Was that your wife that I spoke to on the phone to schedule our meeting?"

An amused grin slid across his face, making Olivia's stomach bounce like one of the volleyballs she'd put away after practice.

"I ask Laura Lee to marry me all the time, but she always says no. Probably because she's already married to my foreman, Frank." His eyes danced. "Laura Lee helps out at the house. She's really more of an aunt or a mother than a housekeeper. She works a few hours a week cleaning and making meals. Freezes a bunch at a time so we have something to eat. If Rachel or I were in charge of meals, it would only be fast food or frozen pizzas."

Olivia let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. Of relief? Did it really matter if he was married or not? She didn't have plans to go anywhere near another man. Not after the mess she'd left behind in Colorado.

She glanced down, the papers on her desk bringing the reason for their meeting back into focus. "Now that I've figured out who you are, I guess we should talk about Rachel." That came out sounding so professional she almost cheered.

Cash leaned back, linking fingers behind his neck and crossing one leg over the other. "I am curious what Rachel did to warrant a meeting this time. Usually it's a few weeks into school before I get the first phone call."

The girl sounded like a bit of trouble. Good thing Olivia had a soft spot for struggling teenage girls. Hoping Cash wouldn't get too upset about what she had to say next, she leaned forward and softened her voice. "She didn't do anything wrong. Yet."

When Cash mirrored her smile, Olivia ignored the way her disobedient legs swam under the desk.

"I've been going over last year's grades, and I'm concerned that if Rachel doesn't make some changes this year she won't be eligible to play due to her GPA. I don't know if you realize this, but your sister's very good."

She paused, wondering how much to share with him. The man probably needed some encouragement if he had to deal with a teenage girl all on his own. "In two days of practice I can tell she's the best player I've ever coached. And if you think I look too young for that to matter, you're wrong. I have enough experience to know what I'm saying. She definitely has the potential to play in college and could easily earn a scholarship. I'd hate to see her lose out on that because of her GPA."

A line cut through Cash's forehead, and Olivia pressed her lips together. Had she pushed too far?

"I'm not sure what to do with that girl. Ever since our parents died she's had trouble, but never to this degree. I try to talk to her, but she won't open up to me. It seems her grades and behavior keep getting worse instead of better."

"What about a tutor or someone to help her complete her class assignments during the school year? I looked up her test scores and I'm pretty sure from what I saw that she's just not applying herself. The scores show she's smart, which makes me think she doesn't care enough to do the work her classes require."

Cash let out an exhale that turned into a laugh as he shook his head. "That sounds like my sister." His arms slid around the cowboy hat on the desk as he shifted forward.

Sensing openness, Olivia's tense muscles relaxed. If only all parents were so receptive.

"Have any free time on your hands, Coach Grayson? Any chance you'd be interested in tutoring one of your new players?"

That was not what Olivia had expected to hear. A small part of her found the idea intriguing. In practice, she could see the hurt hiding behind Rachel's eye rolls and teenage attitude. But Olivia didn't need to get involved with this family. Not when the man across from her had a melt-her-resolve grin that could get her into serious trouble. Again.

"I...might be able to work something out." She wanted to jump out of her chair, grab the words and stuff them back into her mouth. Why would she offer to help Rachel? She absolutely did not have the time. And she needed to stay far, far away from the magnetic Cash Maddox.

"I'd be happy to pay you for your time."

Did he sense her reluctance? "I can't accept payment for tutoring one of the students. It's against the rules and I wouldn't take it anyway."

Olivia frowned. *Quit making it sound like you're still considering it. Open your mouth right now and tell him you can't do it.*

"Volleyball has games on Wednesday nights, right?" Cash barely waited for her nod before continuing. "How about Thursdays after practice you come out to the ranch and help Rachel? We'll pay you by feeding you dinner. Don't worry, I won't make it myself. I'll warm up whatever Laura Lee has in the freezer."

Take back your semioffer and say no.

But...

What if digging up twenty-six years of roots in Colorado and roaring into this Texas town with a trail of dirt behind her wasn't just about running away from her past? What if God had brought her here to help a young girl?

For such a time as this... The verse she'd read in Esther last night pounded through her head and Olivia sighed, resisting the urge to close her eyes or crawl under the desk to escape. "Guess I could swing that."

"Great." Cash's eyebrows shot up as if her answer surprised him. Kind of like it had her. He extracted himself from the desk and she found out the truth to her theory. Definitely taller than her.

"I'll see you the first week of school, then. I hope you know how much we appreciate this." Cash returned the cowboy hat to his head, tipped the brim in her direction and exited the room, leaving Olivia wondering about the state of her decision-making skills.

What had she been thinking agreeing to help? Better yet, what was God thinking?

If anything, God should want to keep her far away from Cash Maddox. Five minutes with the man and Olivia already felt a tug of attraction—to Cash's personality, not just his looks. But she would just have to bury any thoughts of him under her spinning tires. Moving to Texas was all about starting over and leaving the past behind...which meant no dating, no more mistakes.

She might have arrived in Fredericksburg with memories clinging to the trunk of her car and an empty ring finger stripped of all hope, but she refused to repeat the past here.

No looking back. It could be her Texas motto.

The open-air Jeep Wrangler jerked and dipped as Cash drove toward the new pasture site, hands rumbling on the steering wheel. His meeting with Coach Grayson— Olivia—had eaten enough time out of the afternoon that the guys most likely had the portable electric fences in place.

He shoved the stick shift into first gear, pulled on the parking brake and turned off the engine. Leaving the keys dangling in the ignition, he jumped out.

"How we doing?" Cash approached Frank, adjusting the brim of his hat to better shade against the sizzling mid-August sun.

"Just about ready to move them over." Frank studied the grazing cattle, his face weathered from a lifetime of outdoor work. He'd been the foreman at the Circle M for as long as Cash could remember. Frank didn't say much, but when he did, that usually meant it needed to be said. He had a wise, level head on his shoulders and had helped Cash keep the ranch running after Dad died. Frank knew more about ranching than twenty experienced ranch hands roped together.