

Under the Covers

The Texan Quartet #3

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the wonderful and supportive Western Australian romance writers' community: Nikki, Rachael, Jennie, Jenny, Michelle, Shona, Peta, Amanda, Lily, Renee, Elizabeth, Nicola, Leah, Carolyn; and of course my critique group, Anna, Juanita, Lorraine, Susy and Teena. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and for supporting me. Our monthly brunches are always a highlight and leave me rejuvenated.

Chapter 1

This was crazy. How Elle had ever thought she could possibly pull it off, she had no idea.

She had no more than a high school diploma – not so much as a semester of college – and no experience with business, unless you counted the years of bussing tables while at school.

A few online business courses did not an entrepreneur make.

Her lack of experience was really showing now. It was opening day of her bookshop café, Eat, Drink, Read, and she'd lost count of all the things that had gone wrong. The only thing she'd got right was having a 'quiet' opening rather than making a fuss of it – fewer people around to watch her fail.

But still there were enough ... and that was part of the problem. Only one of the two waitresses she'd hired had turned up. The other had called in sick, but from the giggling in the background, Elle was sure it was a lie. The other problem was that people were more interested in the bookstore part of her café than she'd anticipated. There hadn't been a bricks-and-mortar bookstore in this part of Houston for years and it was now packed with people browsing. Elle didn't have the time to go over to check if anyone needed any help, or to make sure half her stock wasn't walking out of the door without being paid for.

She placed two coffees in front of a couple who had been

waiting quite a while. "I'm sorry for the wait."

"Man could have died of thirst," the gray-haired gentleman complained.

Elle kept the smile on her face. "Can I offer you a complimentary cookie, to make sure you don't die of hunger?"

The man raised his eyebrows. "Those chocolate-chip ones look good."

"I'll bring one straight out."

Elle left the table and went straight to her cookie jar. She knew today was all about making sure her customers were happy and had a good experience, so they would spread the word and come back. If she had to give away a truckload of cookies, it would be worth it.

After delivering the cookie to the now appeased man, she took orders at three other tables and then went behind the counter to prepare them.

"This is crazy," Nora, her waitress, commented. Nora was a single mother like Elle and had jumped at the chance to work at the café. She had family to take care of her little girl, who was Toby's age – and, thank heavens – they'd agreed to look after Toby today as well.

"We'd be managing if Drew had shown up."

"I'd fire her if I were you," Nora said. "She's obviously had a big night out and is hungover."

Drew was in college and only a few years younger than Elle. She had admittedly seemed a little flighty in the interview, but she had a huge smile and a friendly attitude that would please the customers.

If she ever turned up.

Elle murmured non-committedly and handed Nora the coffee list while she prepared the food order.

"Helloooo, check out the hotties who just walked in," Nora said.

Elle wasn't interested in good-looking men, but she glanced up just the same and groaned inwardly. One of the hotties was Chris Barker, the lawyer who'd been so kind to her and helped her set up her business plan and review her lease. She didn't want him to see her failing on her first day.

She raised a hand in greeting while he and three friends took

their seats. Imogen was with him. She had helped Elle find something decent to wear when Elle had run into them at a thrift shop a couple of months earlier. Then Imogen had paid to get Elle's hair styled at a very classy salon. Elle had been horrified when she realized the price but the stylist, Joseph, had told her Imogen could afford it. Elle had called Imogen to thank her again and they'd kept in touch afterward, though Elle had never been able to afford to go out with her. With them were a blond woman and the other guy who'd piqued Nora's interest. He turned when Chris waved back and Elle's heart did a little dance.

Nora was right. He was a hottie.

Broad shouldered, he wore his dark hair short and neat – business-like – and he was tall, a good couple of inches taller than Chris. But it was his face that captured Elle's attention. His expression was open; he was smiling and sexy as hell.

Quickly she looked down before he caught her staring at him. She didn't want or need a man in her life now and she didn't have the time to ogle.

"You know them?" Nora asked.

"The shorter guy is Chris, the lawyer who helped me with my business documents."

"If I had known lawyers were that sexy, I'd have found a reason to visit one long ago."

Elle smiled but her mind was on getting the food prepared so she could take Chris's order before he realized how chaotic this place was.

She checked the details and then hurried on to the floor to deliver the cookies and muffins.

"Your coffee will be right out," she said to the people at the table and then took her order pad out of her apron and turned to Chris's table.

"Hi, Chris. Hi, Imogen. Thanks for coming."

He smiled at her. "Looks like your first day is a success."

Elle nodded. "It's busy, all right. Can I take your order?"

"This place is lovely, Elle," Imogen commented. She reminded Elle of a pixie, small with dark hair and an always smiling face.

"Elle, you know Imogen, and these are my friends, George

and Piper.” Chris gestured at the pair.

Elle smiled at them, avoiding looking at George. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I can’t wait to browse the books,” Piper said. “But I’ll leave it until we’ve eaten. Can you give us a few more minutes to decide? Everything looks great.”

“Sure.” Though she was pleased they liked the menu, she was sure the few minutes would stretch to ten or twenty at the rate she was going. She turned and went to make the rest of her orders.

Elle walked away and George admired the way her black skirt shaped her butt as she walked. “When you said you wanted to support one of your clients, you didn’t tell me she was a honey,” he commented to Chris.

“I didn’t notice,” Chris said, squeezing Imogen’s hand.

George rolled his eyes. He was pleased his friend had found someone he loved, and Imogen was a great woman, but it didn’t mean they had to stop admiring other people from afar.

“Are there only two staff?” Piper asked. “It’s a lot of work for two people.”

“Maybe someone will start soon for the lunch shift,” Chris said.

George scanned the room. There was a bookshop area set up at the back, with a couple of comfortable high-backed chairs and coffee tables where people could sit and browse. The bookshelves ran along one wall and provided a colorful contrast to the cream walls. There were a dozen or more tables of different sizes, all a rich dark wood polished to perfection, and in one corner was a play area for children. Imogen was right: the place was lovely – cozy and welcoming. He’d have to tell his mom and sisters about it.

“Are the others coming?” he asked Chris.

“Yeah. Adrian and Libby are picking Kate up from her cousin’s place at eleven and will be here for lunch.”

George knew both Kate and Libby would love the café. He might even browse through the books before he left. He hadn’t had time to read anything lately but that didn’t mean he couldn’t

buy something. He scanned the shelves for the thrillers and noticed a guy take a book from the shelf, look over at the line waiting to pay at the register and then tuck it under his jacket.

He walked toward the door and George frowned. "I'll be right back." He stood and went to intercept the would-be thief. He reached the exit as the man put his hand on the door handle. George stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"You going to pay for that book?"

The man, college age, with scruffy greasy brown hair, scowled at him. "What book?"

"The book you put under your jacket." George nodded at the man's arm, which was pressed tightly against his body.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

Irritation stirred in George. Here was a woman starting her own business and making something better of her life and this schmuck was stealing from her. "I could call the cops if you like, and get them involved."

The guy swore, defiance on his face. "Have you seen the line? I don't have time for that."

Five people were still waiting to pay at the register and Elle and her waitress were serving drinks and making coffees.

"You'll make time," George said, "or you'll leave without it."

The guy dropped the book and wrenched open the café door. "I'm out of here."

George let him go and then picked up the book. It was a thriller and the blurb on the back sounded interesting. He'd buy it himself.

George walked back to his table.

"What was that about?" Piper asked.

"He tried to steal the book," he said, putting it on the table and taking his seat. "Said he didn't have time to wait."

"Jerk," Imogen said.

George glanced around the room and noted how many tables were waiting for food or needed to be cleared.

"Your friend needs a bit of help," he said to Chris.

Chris nodded. "I don't know her well enough to offer. I don't want her to take offense."

"Let me," Piper said. "I spent about a hundred years waitressing. I'll go have a chat with her."

Piper went over to Elle, but George couldn't hear what she said.

Elle answered the ringing phone as Piper got up from the table and walked over. She hoped Piper wasn't going to complain about the long wait for service. This day couldn't get any worse.

"Elle, it's Wayne."

It took her a minute to place the name – he was the guitarist she'd hired to play some music that afternoon, to add a little ambience and celebration to the day.

"Hi, what's up?"

"I can't make it today. I've just had a call from my mother and my dad's in hospital. It's serious."

Her stomach fell like lead.

"I'm sorry."

Elle swallowed. "It's fine. Of course you have to go. I hope your father is all right." She hung up, swallowed past the lump in her throat. Nothing was going right today.

She turned and saw Piper standing there. She braced herself. "I'm sorry about the wait. I'll be over in a second."

"No, it's fine. I wanted to check if you needed a hand. You seem a little short staffed."

Elle couldn't ask a stranger to help out. She had no idea who she was. "One of my waitresses called in sick."

"Then let me help. I waited tables all through college. I can clear tables and take orders easily enough and you've got people waiting to pay."

Elle glanced towards the cash register at the line of people. Her eyes welled up. She couldn't possibly keep up with her customers. Perhaps this was the only way. She had nothing to lose. "That would be great. The guitarist I hired just called to say he can't make it and I never dreamed I'd have this much interest." She handed Piper a spare apron and an order pad.

"What was the guitarist going to do?"

"I thought it would be nice to have some music after lunch on Saturday and Sunday. Nothing too loud, but something for ambience, to draw the afternoon crowd."

"Great idea." Piper smiled. "I might know someone who

can help out. I'll give him a call if you like."

"I can't pay much," Elle said, worried now.

"I don't think he'll charge. Leave it to me." Piper swept into the café and started taking orders.

Elle didn't have time to worry further. She went over to the cash register and started taking payments, apologizing for the delay and handing out the discount cards she'd made for her regulars' award program.

By the time she had finished, the tables had been cleared and there was a long line of coffee and food orders to deal with. It had tipped over to lunchtime so there was also a list of simple meals to make. She hurried into the tiny kitchen, noted the pile of dirty dishes that needed washing and put a load in her industrial dishwasher.

She'd grossly under-estimated how many staff she needed. She required at a minimum another person to deal with the dirty dishes and one for some of the food orders – at least on the weekends. She doubted she'd be this busy during the week.

Really, if she'd been sensible, she would have opened on a Monday, allowed herself the time to get used to everything while the majority of people were at work and then she'd have had all the bugs sorted out by the weekend rush.

Too late to go back now.

A tap at the door had her whirling around. Chris stood there. Elle forced a smile.

"Piper told me about your no-shows. You could do with a busboy. Can I help?"

Elle was pragmatic enough to know she couldn't let pride stand in her way. The most important thing was her business and its success. Her shoulders slumped and she said, "Yes, please."

"All right. Show me how this thing works."

Elle gave him quick directions on the dishwasher and showed him where the dish towels were. Then she hurried out to assess how the rest of her café was faring. She stopped short: Imogen was making coffees.

Imogen smiled at her. "I'm useless at serving, but I make a mean coffee. Nora's doing the food."

Elle didn't protest. "Thank you." She glanced out at the

café. The tables were all cleared and full of people, Piper was taking orders with a smile, and over in the books area, George was chatting to people, recommending novels. The table where they'd all been sitting was now filled with other patrons.

Elle wasn't sure how or what she was going to pay them, but right now it didn't matter.

"Orders up," Nora said, nodding to the plates of food on the counter.

Elle blinked and picked them up.

She would thank her lucky stars later.

Right now she had a café to run.

An hour later, the café suddenly fell silent. Alarmed, Elle looked up from the cash register. Everyone was staring at the person who'd just walked through the door.

Elle's mouth dropped open.

Kent Downer – rock star. And he was carrying a guitar case.

Elle watched, along with the whole café, as he raised a hand to George and walked over to the area she had cleared for the guitarist.

This couldn't really be happening.

The most famous rock star in the world was not in her little café.

Piper had said she was going to call a guitarist.

Elle whipped her gaze to Piper, who was picking up some coffees to take out. "Did you organize this?"

She grinned. "I hope you don't mind."

Elle had no words. Of course she didn't mind. She was frozen to the spot, watching him.

"You should tell him what you want him to do," Piper said.

Was she kidding? He could do whatever the hell he wanted as far as Elle was concerned. If she got a photo of Kent Downer in *Eat, Drink, Read*, it would do wonders for her promotion.

She hurried over to where Kent was unpacking his guitar and then hesitated, not sure what to say, or do.

"Kent, this is the owner, Elle," George said.

Elle had forgotten about George entirely. She blinked,

smiled at him briefly and then turned her attention back to the rock star.

“Howdy, ma’am. Pleasure to meet you.” He held out a hand and gave her a wicked smile.

Elle forgot to breathe.

She generally wasn’t one to have celebrity crushes, but Kent’s music had seen her through the toughest time of her life and she’d viewed him as her lifeline. Now he was standing right there in front of her and wanted to shake her hand.

Quickly she thrust out a hand. “I had no idea ... I mean, thank you for coming ... nice to meet you.” She was babbling, but Kent just smiled, relaxed as could be.

“You want me to set up here?”

Right. She had to focus on why he was here. “Please.” She grabbed the stool she’d tucked out of sight and brought it out. “Is this all right?”

“Perfect. What do you want me to play?”

Elle stopped. She’d not thought about that. His music was generally loud and rock. It would be too much for her little café.

But how could she possibly say it? “I, ah, well ...”

“How about a light acoustic set?” Kent saved her. “Maybe try out one or two of my new songs.”

Relief washed over her. “That sounds wonderful. Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“A glass of water would be mighty fine.”

“Of course.” She hurried away to get it. Conversations had started up again around the room, but everyone was sneaking glances at Kent and lots of the customers had their phones out to take pictures and videos.

At the sink, Nora bumped into her. “How the hell did that happen?” she asked.

Elle shook her head. “Wayne cancelled and Piper said she had a friend who could help ...”

Some friend.

“Well, girl, our lunchtime rush isn’t going to end.” She nodded to where people were at the window of the café, peering in.

Elle couldn’t think about that now. She took the glass back to where Kent had started his first song. The noise level was

perfect, not so loud as to prevent conversation, but not so soft that people couldn't hear. She placed the water on the table next to him and he nodded his thanks.

Elle stepped back, right into George. He grunted and his hands came up to steady her.

"Oh, sorry." She turned and was standing only inches away from him, staring up into his deep sapphire blue eyes. They were the most unusual color she'd seen, such a deep blue, and he was looking rather bemused.

She blinked and moved away, and would have crashed into a coffee table if George hadn't reached out and grabbed her arm. His fingers were warm but his grip was hard, hard enough to break the spell his eyes had cast. Hard enough to remind her of reality and the dangers of not looking beyond a pretty face until it was too late.

Elle shook her arm free. "Thanks."

She headed back to the safety of the counter and her orders.

George wandered over to ask if a customer needed help with the books, but his mind was firmly on Elle. There had been a moment – she'd looked into his eyes and he'd felt a connection, but then she'd stepped back, and when he'd grabbed her to stop her falling, her expression had turned to fear.

What had happened to her? Why was she afraid of someone trying to help her? He knew she'd gone to Chris's pro bono office, so clearly she didn't have a lot of money, but perhaps there was more to it. He would have to ask his friend.

Adrian, or Kent as he was known to most people, was playing an acoustic version of one of his rock songs and it sounded great. They'd have to discuss putting out an acoustic album at a later date.

After sending the customer toward the cash register with her new books, George pulled out his phone. He took a picture of Adrian and then tweeted, *Guess at which hot new Houston bookstore café Kent is currently doing an acoustic set?*

It would drive a lot of interest and he'd tweet the answer a little later. He didn't want the café to be mobbed, but it would be good promotion for both Kent and Elle, and as Kent's

manager he had to consider the business side of this favor.

Adrian's niece, Kate and his wife, Libby wandered over.

"This place is awesome," Kate said.

"Sure is, Shorty. I might pick up a book or two myself."

His attention was taken by Elle, who was serving the table closest to them. A woman waited until Elle had finished and then asked, "Do you have the last Jessop Chronicles?"

"Of course. It's this way."

George glanced at Libby, who was the author of those books. She grinned.

"You should sign it, Libby," Kate said, loudly.

The customer, who was still close by, turned and said, "Are you Libby Myles?"

Libby nodded and George noted Elle's reaction. Her mouth opened ever so slightly and speculation crossed her face before she gave a little shake of her head.

George knew what she was thinking. Any decent business person would think it. If she got author-signed copies of the Jessop Chronicles it would be another draw card to her bookshop café.

"Could you sign my book?" the customer asked.

"Sure."

They moved over to one of the wing-backed chairs and Libby sat so she could sign the book. Another couple of customers hurriedly grabbed copies of the book and brought them over.

George smiled. He doubted Libby would get out of the chair until all the books had been sold but he knew she'd be fine with that.

The café was filling with people who were standing around watching Kent play. They were crowding the space between the tables and not buying anything. It would become a safety issue if it continued. When Kent finished his song, George stepped up in front of him.

"Listen up, folks. If you're not buying anything you need to move out of the way. Take-out coffee is available at the counter so line up if you want it. There are people who want to enjoy their meals and be able to get out of their seats when they're ready to leave."

People quickly shuffled into a line, many happy to stand at the back.

George chuckled. That would get Elle a few more sales. He stepped away so Kent could continue, and monitored the crowd. It took him back to the early days with Kent, when he'd been both manager and bouncer for his friend.

Then they'd been in clubs and bars which could only be considered seedy. Dark, smoky and smelling of alcohol, with décor that had seen its fair share of hard knocks.

Elle's café was a far cozier option.

A few patrons were lingering after receiving their take-out coffees. He wandered over and when they noticed him they began to browse the books.

Not all Kent's fans would be so well behaved, but these weren't the hardcore ones. They were the ones who'd been in the right place at the right time.

Elle walked by and George stopped her. "You should ask Libby to do a book signing here when her book comes out next month. I'm sure she'll be happy to."

Elle seemed surprised and a little cautious that he was talking to her. George didn't like that at all.

"Thanks for the suggestion," she said. "I'll think about it." She continued to the kitchen with the tray of dirty dishes.

There was something about her that got under George's skin.

And he wasn't the type of man to ignore an itch.

He just needed to figure out how to scratch it.

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