

The Next Mrs. Blackthorne (Bitter Creek, No. 6)

By Joan Johnston

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A lavish summer wedding is being planned at Bitter Creek ranch. In one month, Clay Blackthorne will wed socialite Jocelyn Montrose. But when she hears stirrings of a corporate takeover by the family's archrival, North Grayhawk, Jocelyn covertly heads to North's ranch to offer a valuable commodity -- herself -- if North will call off his plans. Striking a deal to spend the summer with the steely, seductive North, Jocelyn fails to see that her sacrifice to protect the man she loves may have dire consequences.
Stunned by his fiancee's rejection, Clay, a newly appointed federal judge, begins presiding over an incendiary terrorism trial, which brings him face to face with his first love, Libby Grayhawk. As tensions mount, forces beyond Clay's control threaten the women most precious to him in the past and the present. And only in a daring act of sacrifice will he know which woman will become the next Mrs. Blackthorne.

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Editorial Review

From Booklist
Jocelyn is engaged to widower Clay Blackthorne, a federal judge in Austin, and savvy enough to know that she is an outsider in the rough-and-tumble feud between two rich and powerful families: the Blackthornes and the Grayhawks. So she decides to help. North Grayhawk is interested in her, so she makes him an offer: herself in his bed if he agrees to give back his shares of the Blackthornes' land. He is a cold man, but he agrees. Clay deduces what she is doing and says he'll wait for her. Meanwhile, his daughter, Kate, devises her own plan. Libby, North's sister, and Clay were once in love, but their families kept them apart. Kate now manages to bring them together as North and Jocelyn fall in love. But Kate has to be put in danger's way before the two feuding families finally settle their differences. With a soap-opera plot and manly men and tempestuous women, Johnston's dramatic tale is *dallas*, *dynasty*, and *Bonanza* all rolled into one. *Maria Hatton*
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About the Author
Joan Johnston is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than fifty novels and novellas with more than 15 million copies of her books in print. She has worked as a director of theatre, drama critic, newspaper editor, college professor, and attorney on her way to becoming a full-time writer. She lives in Colorado and Florida. You can find out more about Joan at JoanJohnston.com.

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Chapter One

Jocelyn Montrose didn't mean to eavesdrop. But the arguments and shouting coming from the library at the Castle, the legendary ranch house at Bitter Creek, were hard to ignore. Her future husband, Clay Blackthorne, was being verbally attacked in that room.

Those assaulting him were his family -- his twin brother Owen and sister-in-law Bay, his younger sister Summer and brother-in-law Billy Coburn, and his father Blackjack and stepmother Ren. Clay's brother Trace and his wife, Callie, were on the speakerphone from Australia, where Trace owned a cattle station.

Jocelyn pressed her cheek against the wall next to the slightly open door, peeked inside and listened.

"You see what a reliable advisor Morgan DeWitt turned out to be," Owen snarled, his hand on the SIG P226 he wore as a Texas Ranger. "That bastard was an out-and-out thief and murderer."

"Morgan's suggestion to incorporate the Bitter Creek Cattle Company and sell stock seemed sound to me," Clay replied. "The DeWitt ranch is incorporated, and they've never had a problem. I didn't know until a year ago that Morgan was anything less than the astute advisor he seemed to be."

"We incorporated Bitter Creek on your advice," Summer said angrily.

"A suggestion I made based on -- "

"That sonofabitch's advice," Blackjack interrupted. "This is getting us nowhere. The question is, how do we stop that bastard -- whoever he is -- from buying up a controlling interest in the Bitter Creek Cattle Company?"

The silence was deafening.

"This is a disaster," Trace said from the speakerphone on Blackjack's desk.

"It's not my fault!" Summer shot back.

"I wasn't blaming you," Trace said.

Jocelyn saw Clay's jaw tighten. It was clear they blamed him. She wanted to walk into that room and put her arms around him and comfort him. But he'd forbidden her to attend the family meeting. She wasn't Clay's wife yet, as he'd made very clear to her earlier this morning.

They'd arrived at Bitter Creek last night to make final preparations for the wedding and had discovered that all hell had broken loose. Clay's rejection of her offer of support, her plea to be allowed to stand by his side, still stung.

"Anybody got a useful suggestion how to get us out of this fix?" Billy said, his dark-eyed gaze moving from grim face to grimmer face around the room.

Jocelyn felt her heart sink. No one seemed to have any idea how to stop the anonymous corporate raider who was threatening to steal the Blackthornes' heritage. In a hostile takeover, the existing management was usually terminated. Summer and Billy ran the ranch, but the Blackthornes had owned Bitter Creek, a property in South Texas the size of a small northeastern state, for nearly a hundred and fifty years. The new management would have the power to do whatever they wanted -- even sell the ranch to strangers.

"Maybe this raider just wants greenmail," Trace suggested.

"What's that?" Bay asked from her seat in one of the two horn-and-hide chairs in front of Blackjack's desk.

"He makes a quick profit by threatening to take control and then selling the stock back at a premium -- more than it's really worth," Clay explained to his sister-in-law as he poured himself another glass of Jack Daniels from the bar.

Jocelyn watched Blackjack, who sat in a swivel chair at his desk, down a glass of whiskey in two swallows.

Clay's stepmother laid a hand on Blackjack's shoulder and said, "It would be worth any price to save Bitter Creek, wouldn't it?"

"It's blackmail, plain and simple," Blackjack said, slamming his empty glass on the old-fashioned wooden desk. "And I'll be damned before I'll pay it!"

"What else is left?" Summer said, her voice breaking. "You won't consider a poison pill or a scorched earth defense or . . ."

Jocelyn heard Summer swallow a sob as she turned into Billy's open arms, and then Billy saying, "It's all right, sweetheart. We'll think of something."

But what she heard was more deathly silence.

Apparently the Blackthornes were unwilling to use the few methods of shark repellent -- ways to discourage an unfriendly takeover -- still available to them. A poison pill was anything that might make the target company stock less attractive, like authorizing a new series of preferred stock that gave shareholders the

right to redeem shares at a premium after the takeover.

Jocelyn shuddered when she considered the scorched earth defense. That involved the target company disposing of its crown jewels -- its most desirable property -- to thwart the takeover. The Blackthornes might be able to save the assets of the Bitter Creek Cattle Company from being confiscated by a corporate raider -- if they sold the precious land their forebears had bled and died for since the Civil War.

No wonder they were unwilling to consider that option.

"I know who the raider is," Clay said.

"Why the hell didn't you say so?" Blackjack said.

An expectant hush fell on the room. Jocelyn held her breath, wondering who the anonymous corporate raider could be.

When Clay took another slow swallow of whiskey instead of divulging the name of their nemesis, Summer prodded, "Please, Clay. Who is it?"

"North Grayhawk."

Jocelyn gasped, then covered her mouth and looked through the crack in the door to see if she'd been discovered.

No one was paying any attention to her. The Blackthorne and Coburn men stared at Clay through narrowed eyes, their jaws locked and their hands fisted in anger. The women reached out to restrain their enraged husbands, but their bodies were no less tense, their anger no less palpable.

"I should have known," Blackjack said. "Those damned Grayhawks have been the bane of my existence since -- "

Jocelyn saw him cut himself off as he glanced over his shoulder at his wife, who caressed the hair at his nape and said, "I'm so sorry, Jackson."

"It's not your fault," he said gruffly. He reached a hand up toward his wife and she grasped it, as their eyes met and held.

Jocelyn felt her throat swell with emotion at the look that passed between them. She wondered what it would be like to be loved like that. In the stories she'd heard, Blackjack and Ren were star-crossed lovers who'd married other people -- Eve DeWitt and Jesse Creed, respectively -- and raised families who'd become mortal enemies.

After Ren's husband was shot and killed under suspicious circumstances, Blackjack had offered to give up everything he owned, including the land that was the source of contention now, to marry Lauren Creed, the woman he'd always loved. Eve's untimely death had made the sacrifice unnecessary.

Blackjack turned back to his family and said, "If anyone's to blame for this mess -- "

"It's the Grayhawks," Summer interjected. "King's behind this, Daddy. He must be."

"I'm not so sure King Grayhawk is the villain this time," Clay said.

"He hates Daddy," Summer said.

"So does North," Clay said. "And he's the man my shark watcher says is our anonymous corporate raider."

"I don't disagree that North hates us," Blackjack said. "I just don't understand why that pup has taken up his daddy's fight like it was his own."

"He blames you for his mother's divorce from his father, her suicide, and the succession of stepmothers that came and went because King could never find a replacement for Eve DeWitt. The woman you stole from him. The only woman he ever loved," Clay said.

"How could you possibly know something like that?" Summer asked.

"Libby told me."

Jocelyn felt her heart skip a beat at the mention of North Grayhawk's sister Libby, the woman she knew Clay had loved once upon a time. The woman he might have chosen to marry instead of her, but hadn't. Libby Grayhawk was closer to Clay's age, and they had a history -- and a daughter -- together. Jocelyn had tried to convince herself that Libby was no threat to her future happiness. She hadn't been entirely successful.

Two years ago, Jocelyn had spent day after day at her sister's bedside while Giselle's body was being slowly eaten away by cancer, listening to stories of Giselle and Clay's life together. Libby Grayhawk's name had come up surprisingly often. Clay had definitely loved her. The only reason he hadn't married her twenty years ago, when she was pregnant with his child, was because King Grayhawk had forbidden it.

A year ago, Libby and Clay had met again in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, when their eighteen-year-old daughter Kate was kidnapped. Jocelyn wasn't sure what had been said, but something had changed between them. Some dormant ember had sparked to life.

Jocelyn had been worried that she might lose Clay to his former love. So she'd admitted to Libby that she'd fallen in love with Clay before he'd ever met her sister Giselle. That she'd been so jealous of her sister, when Clay had chosen Giselle over Jocelyn, that she'd stayed away for years -- until Giselle had gotten sick with cancer.

She'd revealed to Libby a secret she'd previously told no one. As her sister lay dying, Giselle had begged Jocelyn to take care of Clay and to love him. And that she did love Clay...and hoped to marry him.

Jocelyn didn't know if her speech to Libby had made a difference. But when the summer was over, Clay had proposed to her -- not Libby.

Jocelyn had discovered over the past year that she was engaged to a far different man than Giselle had married. The Clay Blackthorne her sister had married had been groomed his whole life to become president of the United States.

That dream was gone. Dead. Killed by scandal.

It had turned out that Kate's kidnapping was a ruse to get Clay from Washington, D.C., to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Once there, a villain hoping to blackmail Clay into using his position as U.S. attorney general to push through an illegal oil deal had framed him for murder.

Clay had been cleared of the charge, but the scandal had resulted in his resignation as U.S. attorney general. And ended his political career. In a world dominated by appearances, there would always be people who

believed he'd literally "gotten away with...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marie Boyd:

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