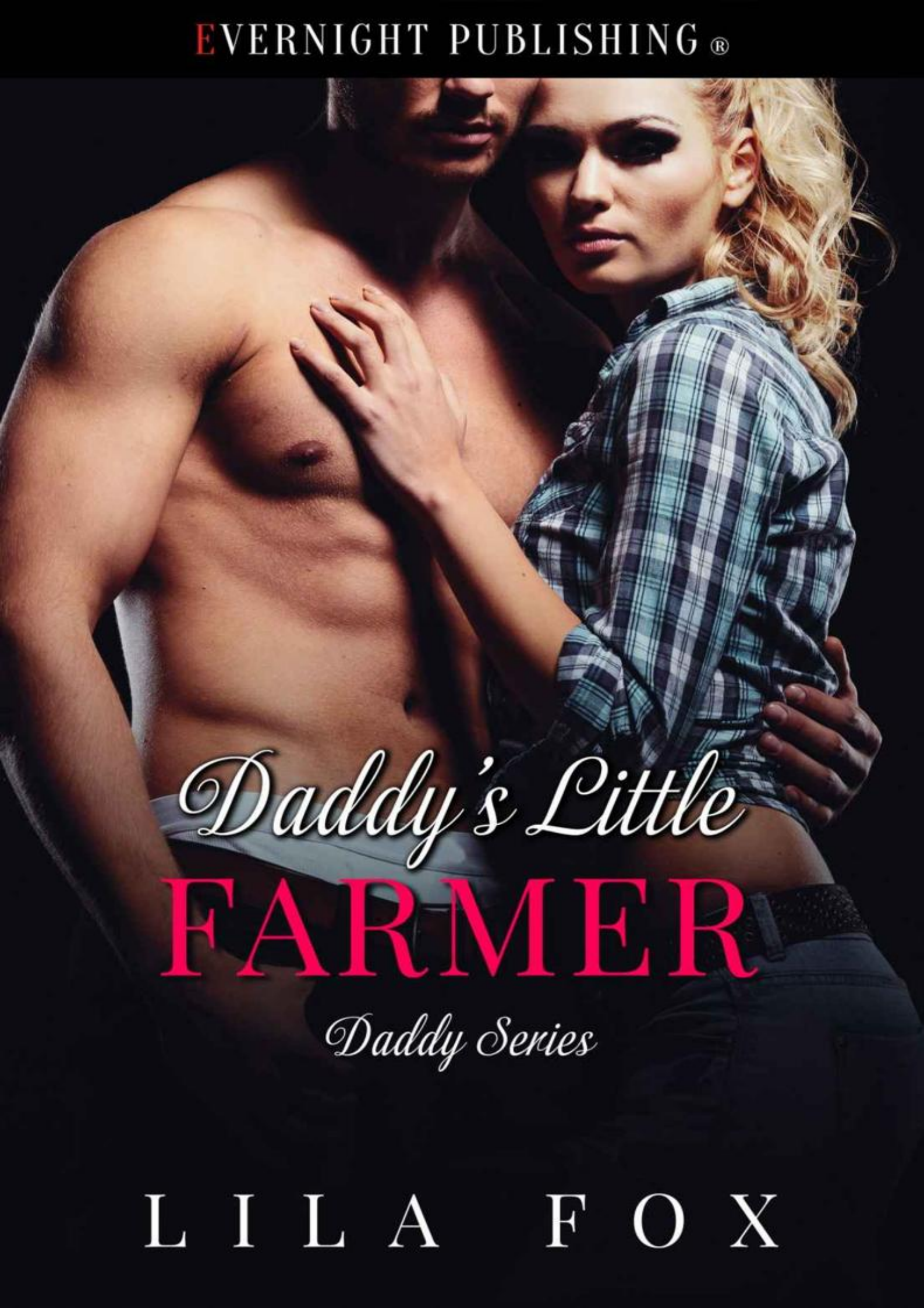


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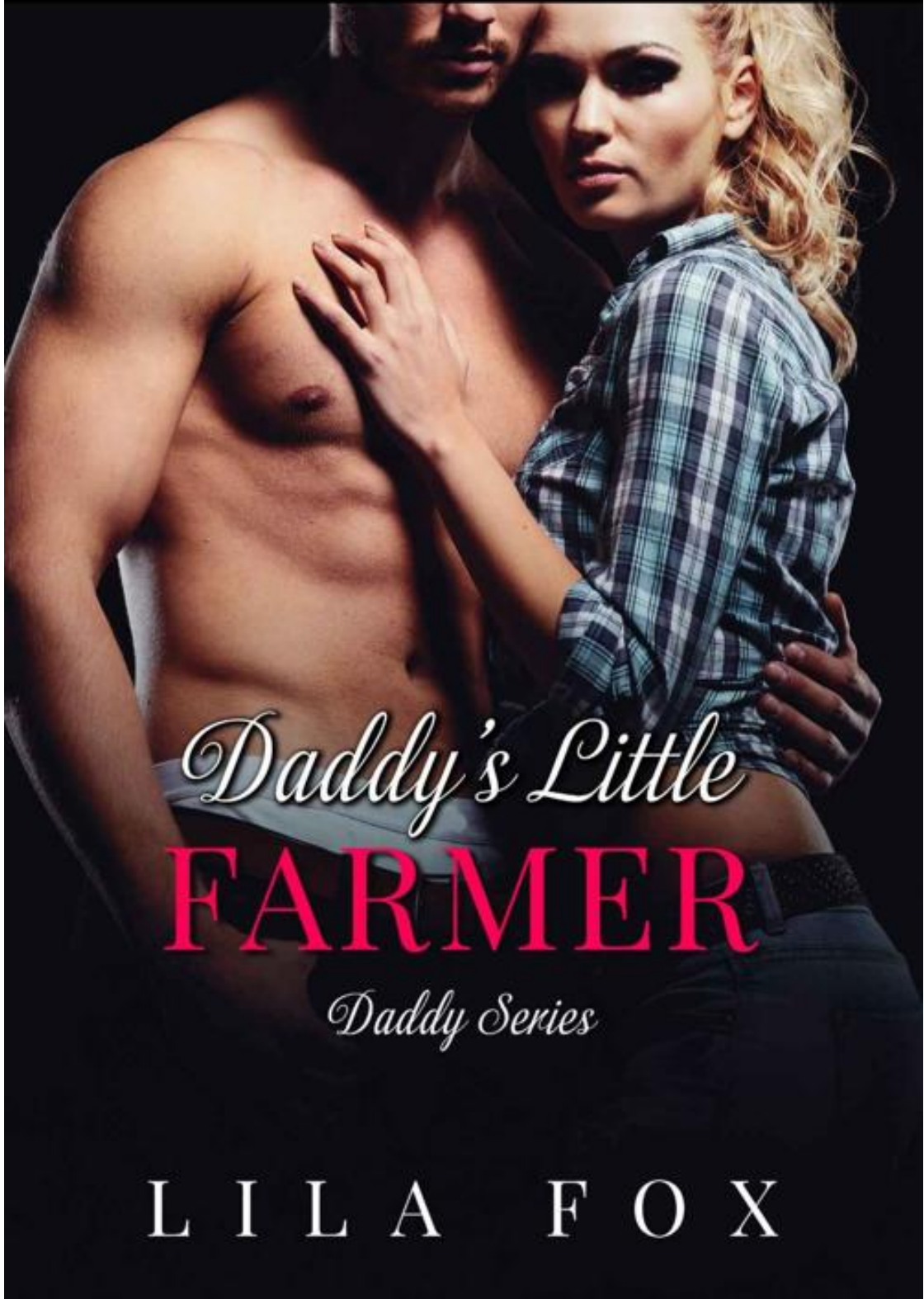


Daddy's Little
FARMER

Daddy Series

L I L A F O X

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the Evernight family. You've made me the author I am today. Thank you.

DADDY'S LITTLE FARMER

The Daddy Series, 30

Lila Fox

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Chapter One

Rafael looked out the limo car window as they drove down a dusty gravel road. The fields and trees on both sides of the road brought a lot of color and definition to the area, and he would have liked it if it hadn't been so isolated.

His friends and business partners, Darian, Gage, and Kaleb, were in the car with him, along with their women, Larkin, Brylee, and Aleena. They were in the area looking for a location to put in a strip mall. He turned to study his friends and their littles.

The way the couples interacted with each other made him slightly envious. He could tell the guys loved their littles by the way they touched and looked at them. And their littles worshiped their daddies and did whatever they could to please him.

The last few relationships he'd been in were disappointing. All the women he'd met were high society, high maintenance, and snobbish, and he was bored or pissed within the first few weeks with them. He wanted what his friends had, but he didn't think it would happen in the circles he ran in, so he concentrated on making more money. It was the only thing that gave him pleasure anymore.

"Do you mind if I stop at the widow Coleman's place to check on her?" Tony asked. He was the man that had been showing them some land the men might want to invest in. So far, it didn't look promising because the land wasn't near a city or even a large town.

They pulled into a long driveway and up to a weather-beaten two-story white house. The area was organized, but he could tell these people were poor by how the machinery and truck looked. Everything was ancient and rusty.

They all got out and looked around. The place was extremely quiet except for some birds and what he guessed might be chickens. The air felt fresher than it did at home until

he got a whiff of the animals. He could honestly say he'd never smelled anything so potent in his life.

Rafael looked around. He'd never been on a farm like this in his life. In fact, he'd never been around animals of any kind because his father forbade him to have one. His father had been a harsh cold man, and he couldn't remember ever seeing him smile.

Tony walked up to the house and knocked. He did it a few more times, and no one answered.

Depending on how old she was, she might not have heard him knocking. Another thought popped into his head that maybe she'd hurt herself, but Tony didn't seem alarmed.

"I'll go check the barn," Tony said.

"Daddy, can we go with Tony? I want to see the chickens?" Larkin asked.

"How about we all go?" Darian said.

Rafael followed the group into a barn, and although old, it was clean and tidy, like the yard. He wondered if the old woman got help because she surely couldn't keep the place up herself. Even if she was fairly young, the place looked large, and they found more and different animals the longer they looked for the widow.

Through the barn, there were a few fenced-off areas that housed the animals. The animals were well-behaved because they weren't squawking or making any noise.

"Mara," Tony yelled. "How often have I told you that you can't take a nap on a horse? You're going to get stomped."

Rafael came around the corner to see what had upset Tony, and his eyes widened. This couldn't be the widow. She didn't look like she was out of high school. She also looked like an angel with her long, light-blonde hair and big eyes.

"That's the widow?" Larkin asked.

"Yes. It's a long story," Tony said.

The woman sat up on a large horse with no saddle or reins, so he didn't know how she controlled the thing.

She rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Tony, Charlie would never stomp me." She leaned forward to hug the horse's neck. "Would you, Charlie?"

Rafael was amazed when the horse whinnied as if it was answering her.

"Oh, can I pet it?" Brylee asked.

Mara nodded. "Sure. Have you ever been around a horse?"

Brylee shook her head.

"I want to pet it, too," Aleena said.

"I don't think I want to," Larkin said. "It's very big."

Mara smiled. "I'll help you. I promise Charlie is the perfect gentleman. Right, Charlie?"

Rafael smiled, and the girls laughed when the horse nodded its head. Hell, could the thing understand her and communicate with her?

Tony had opened the gate as the horse came forward. He was worried when the girls got too close, but their men seemed calm but watchful.

The woman slid off the horse's back, and he was amazed at how small she really was next to the horse. She wasn't any bigger than the girls standing by her. He wondered why the thing didn't run off. It just followed the woman out of the paddock and stood patiently beside her.

Mara reached out for Larkin's hand. "It's okay. Come a little closer."

Rafael watched Larkin timidly walk to the widow. The woman took her hand, and they petted it together.

"Oh, he's softer than I thought he'd be," Larkin said.

Mara grinned. "He is. Isn't he handsome?"

Tony snorted. “And we wonder why he and the others are so spoiled.”

Mara giggled. She stood with her hand on the halter as all three girls petted and talked to the horse.

“Can I sit on him?” Brylee asked.

“No, baby. Not today,” Gage said.

The girls walked back to their daddies.

“What do you need, Tony?” Mara asked.

“You know I worry about you, girl. You can’t take care of the whole farm by yourself.”

Rafael looked around. He couldn’t see the whole area, but it looked pretty large. “How many animals do you have here?”

The first time the girl faced him and looked him in the eyes, he felt like someone had kicked him in the chest. She had the face of an angel with her long-blond hair and bright-blue innocent eyes. When she smiled, he saw the two dimples on her cheeks, which made her seem even younger and sweeter.

“I have a cow, four horses, one donkey, three goats, ten chickens, twelve cats, and my dog, Tiny.”

Jesus. “How old are you?” Rafael asked. He looked around and had yet to see a dog.

The woman looked surprised. “I’m twenty-three. How old are you?”

Tony snorted.

“I’m thirty-five.”

“Okay.” Mara smiled and turned back to Tony. “I think I’m doing pretty good.”

“You are, but how long can you keep this up?” Tony asked.

She shrugged, and Rafael saw something close to despair before she turned away. Now, what was that about?

“I don’t think we should talk about it in front of the visitors,” Mara said as her attention was on the horse that stood by her.

Tony sighed. “Do you want me to bring dinner by later?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you. I do need your advice, though.”

Tony scowled. “Is your sister or Franklin bothering you again?”

Mara nodded.

“I’ll come back as soon as I drop these guys off.”

“Okay, thank you.” She turned to the girls. “I’m glad you could stop by today. The only visitors I get are Tony and a few others. I like meeting new people.”

“It was nice meeting you,” the girls said.

“I hope I’ll see you again,” Mara said. She grabbed onto the horse’s halter. “Come on, Charlie.”

Rafael watched her lead the horse back into the paddock.

“Let’s get you all back to the airport,” Tony said.

The group settled into the limo. Rafael looked back at the farm, more disturbed than he thought he should be for a woman he didn’t know.

“Tell me about her story,” Rafael said abruptly, ignoring his friend’s chuckles.

The older man wiped a hand down his face in frustration. “I was best friends with Mara’s father and promised him I’d care for her after he died. She lived with her mother and sister, who are bitches with a capital B.” Tony looked at the girls. “Excuse my language, ladies.”

They giggled.

“Mara has always been a sweet girl, and she has difficulty standing up for herself or saying no to people. A guy

named Joseph Coleman got her to marry him by a judge before I heard about it. He was in his late forties and married her to care for him and his mother, who was also a B and terminally ill. She spent the first two years doing everything, from taking care of his bedridden mother, to the house, caring for him, and even most of the farm because he worked at the bank in town. She wouldn't let me help her get a divorce. I would have said her living anyplace was better than her own home, but I was wrong. Her husband's place was abusive."

"Why didn't the authorities get involved?" Darian asked.

"They tried, but she always denied it."

"Why?" Aleena asked.

"I think part of it was she had nowhere else to go besides her mother's. I tried to get her to move in with my wife and me, but she wouldn't do that either. Her mother-in-law died about two years after she moved there, and then her husband died in a car accident about seven months later. Neither had a will or other relatives, so the farm and everything went to her."

Tony shook his head. "I thought she'd finally find some peace. I thought she'd get rid of the animals, and she did for the most part, but then she started bringing abused or injured ones home. Add to that, a realtor started harassing her to sell because he knew he could make a lot of money from it. People around the area are always looking for acreages and will pay good money for them."

"Jesus, that poor girl," Kaleb said.

"That's not the end of it. Mara's sister, Judith, thinks she should sell it and give her half the money."

"Why?" Darian asked.

"Who knows the woman's reasoning, but Mara has held strong so far. I think that has to do with the animals. I'm trying to help as much as possible, but she sometimes makes it hard."

Rafael had so many ideas racing through his brain, but he needed some time to think about them.

“I feel so bad for her,” Larkin said, looking up at Darian. “Isn’t there anything we can do, Daddy?”

Darian nodded.

Rafael cleared his throat. “I’ll take care of it.” He ignored the smirks on his friends’ faces. He turned to Tony. “Give me a few days, and I’ll get back to you.”

“I’ll take any help I can get. The woman is as sweet as can be but as stubborn as her donkey.”

The group shook hands with Tony, got settled in the private plane, and took off. Rafael watched the girls get settled in the back, where there was a table they used for playing cards.

“What are you thinking of doing?” Gage asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you think you’ll take her as your own?” Kaleb asked.

“I’ve got a lot of thinking to do. I don’t want to jump into anything that might hurt either of us.”

“Well, if you don’t want her, I’ve got several men I’d like her to meet. Every one of them would love to have a woman like her,” Darian said.

Rafael nodded. He was confused at the anger that built in him over the idea of another man touching her. “I’ll get back to you.” He didn’t like that he was already possessive of her and needed answers to some of his questions before deciding.

Chapter Two

Mara walked into her house after doing the chores. Her body was dragging, and all she wanted to do was sleep.

“It’s about fucking time,” Judith, her sister, said.

Mara saw that she had helped herself to the only food Mara had in the house, which was very little.

She sighed. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re going to talk about this damn house. You can’t live here and take care of everything. Just move home so we can sell the place.”

“For one thing, it’s my house, not yours, and I would rather live on the streets than go back home. Now, for the last time, get out of my house and stay out, or I’ll call the sheriff.”

Judith laughed. “Like he’d do anything. I’ve been fucking him for the last few months.”

Mara’s mouth dropped open. “But he’s married with two kids.”

Judith rolled her eyes. “So.”

Her sister was now the town whore. Wonderful. “You still can’t come in here whenever you want.”

“Sis, I can do whatever I want.”

Mara’s teeth clenched together. “Get out.”

Judith smiled. “No. We’re not done talking yet.”

Mara sighed and opened the back door. “Tiny,” she yelled.

“You fucking bitch,” Judith said and stood when her dog walked into the kitchen.

Mara petted the dog’s head. He was one of the strays that had shown up at the farm one day. Mara had instantly fallen in love. To say he was big was an understatement. The top of his head was at her waist. She had no idea what kind he

was, but she guessed from the look of him he had some wolf and German shepherd in him.

The first time she laid eyes on him, she couldn't believe the bad shape he was in. He was very thin and looked like he'd been beaten or had fought a few times. Add to that, she thought he had mange because his skin and fur were a mess. She spent hours getting him better and teaching him to trust her.

He hadn't let her near him for a few weeks, so she had to deal with his issues from afar. She'd hidden his medicine in treats and meat she made for him. He'd let her get closer every day. When he'd finally given in, she'd struggled to get him bathed the first time to get his skin condition under control.

What had come to her emaciated and rough looking was now a large male dog with a beautiful tan and black fur. His body was strong and filled out, and he followed her most of the day. Although she wouldn't see him for a few hours some days, he always returned to her. He was why she wasn't afraid to stay in the house by herself anymore.

"Get out and stay out or I'll let him have you," Mara said. She almost smiled when Tiny growled, and Judith squeaked and raced out the front door.

Mara sank to her knees and hugged the dog for a long time. "Thank you, my friend," she murmured.

Tiny licked her face making her giggle.

"Let's make dinner. I'm not sure what my sister left for us to eat, but we always have eggs and milk from the cow." She liked that she could take care of herself for the most part. She sometimes got sick of eggs, but they were a good source of protein, and she always added spices, whatever veggies she had, and cheese to make them taste better.

Mara pulled a large piece of meat from the freezer and stuck it in the microwave to thaw before she started cracking eggs in a pan.

When the microwave dinged, she unwrapped the meat and handed it to Tiny. "There you go, my friend." At first,

she'd tried cooking the meat, but he seemed to like it better, a bit frozen and raw. She was lucky to get the deer meat from the local butcher. He always gave her the bones and the meat they couldn't use and even some of the hearts and livers of the deer, which were good for Tiny.

She set a plate down by him with some eggs before she sat at the table and ate her own. She didn't take long to eat and wash the few dishes she used.

"I'm going to shower, and then we'll go to bed," she said to Tiny as he continued to gnaw on the bone.

Mara made sure to lock all the doors and windows before stripping and stepping into the shower.

Her thoughts went to her late husband. Even though they weren't a traditional couple, she still called him that. He was much older than her and as gay as a person could get. He'd wanted to marry her for several reasons. One was to keep his reputation clean because if the town found out he was gay, he would have been crucified, tarnishing his family's name. Even though it was the twentieth century, people tended to be old-fashioned in the country and in the middle of the Bible Belt.

One of the other reasons was his mother. He needed someone to care for her while he was working at the town bank. Both he and his mother had been stern and negative people. They always had to complain about something. Her husband, Joseph, was bitter and sometimes took it out on her. Mara had gotten used to it for the most part. She'd just remind herself it was better than living with her mother and sister. It helped tremendously having the animals to take care of. They were her refuge.

One good thing that came from her sacrifice was that Joseph had money to last for the rest of her life, so she wouldn't have to get an ordinary job and could save as many animals as possible. It had always been her dream to set up a rescue for animals that had been abandoned or abused in any way.

If her mother and sister ever found out about the money, she'd be harassed even more than she already was. She was glad she'd taken Tony's idea about having a will for herself. If something happened to her, half would go to Tony and the other half to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in the area.

Tony didn't want to talk about her dying or giving him part of the estate, but she told him it was "just in case." He deserved the money for taking care of her, and he'd be the one to sell the farm. He'd also have to get the animals to the ASPCA. It would be a hard, time-consuming job, and he deserved to be paid.

Later that night, she stared up at the ceiling in her bedroom. Her thoughts turned to the group of people that had been there earlier that day. She would have liked to get to know the women better. They seemed very sweet, and she had prayed for friends for years, but that hadn't been possible with the situation she was stuck in. The men had been intimidating and handsome—one in particular. His eyes seemed to see inside her heart and soul, and he made her feel shivery inside her body.

Her thoughts splintered when Tiny's head popped up at the foot of her bed. She could tell he heard something and tried to listen. It sounded like something scraping and thumping against the house, and she tried to remember whether a tree or bush was close enough to make the sound, but she knew there wasn't. Someone was trying to frighten her again, and she guessed her sister had something to do with it.

When Tiny started growling, she sat up and got out of bed. The dog only growled like that if there was a human nearby.

Mara pulled the drapes over, enough to peek outside. All she saw were shadows which made a shiver run down her spine. They could hide anywhere on the farm, and she'd never know if she was in danger until it was too late. She hated feeling scared all the time. She couldn't remember when she felt truly safe since her father's death when she was ten.

She snuck around from room to room, peeking out the windows to see if she saw anything. After a few minutes, she heard a car start, but it sounded like it was down the road a bit.

When she got back to bed, she sighed. She was so tired but couldn't seem to settle down. She knew she was unlikely to get much sleep, but she was getting used to it. It was amazing what a person could do being sleep-deprived.

Chapter Three

Rafael sat behind his desk. His thoughts weren't on work where they should have been but on the woman he'd met a few days ago. He couldn't get her out of his head. His obsession with her grew every hour, and he had no idea where to take this. They were from two different worlds.

Someone knocked on his door.

"Come in."

Rafael smiled when he saw his good friend Darian. They'd known each other their whole lives and came from the same background. Both had grown up extremely privileged. Both families had their own planes and traveled around the world several times. He'd met a lot of movie stars, presidents, heads of state, kings, and was even friends with a few.

Darian sat down across from his desk. "How's everything going?"

Rafael nodded. "Fine. How about you and your sweet little?"

Darian snorted. "She's been getting punished a lot lately."

Rafael grinned at the frustrated look on his friend's face. "Why?"

"She plays hide-n-seek, but she supposedly forgets to tell me. When I can't find her, I start to worry. I have to use my mean Daddy voice, that's what Larkin calls it, and she'll come out. I know she's just asking for attention, but I don't know what's upsetting her. She says it's nothing, but I know her."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Not really. The only different thing that's happened lately was meeting Mara. I know the girls are worried about her, but they just met her. How can they feel this deeply after spending less than thirty minutes with her?"

“I have to tell you, I’m doing the same thing. I can’t get her off my mind,” Rafael said.

“Then we need to do something. Do you have any ideas?” Darian asked.

“I can’t just bring her here. She has a farm. I’ve got nowhere to put the animals, and I doubt she’d leave or give them up.”

“You’ve got several hundred acres in your backyard. Can’t you take a few acres and build a barn for her?”

Rafael hadn’t thought of that. He’d draw up a plan and get his groundskeeper in charge of contracting it out. “That’s a great idea.”

“You’ll have to find trailers to bring them here. It will be at least a seven-hour drive,” Darian said.

There was a lot to consider, but he knew his groundskeeper, Porter, had grown up on a farm. Rafael always thought the man missed the animals because he fed the small critters that lived on the land.

Rafael smiled. “I’ll call Tony and see what he says.”

“The man knows her pretty well.”

“Do you think he’ll have a problem with me taking her away from home?”

Darian shook his head. “I doubt it. He’s protective of the girl. Tony says she seems to be having difficulty with a few people in town. A young girl like that on her own tends to get in trouble.”

Rafael nodded.

“Call me when she gets here so the girls can meet her.”

“You’re pretty sure I’ll get her to come?”

Darian grinned. “Oh, I’d bet you a million dollars she’ll be here within a month.”

Rafael’s eyes widened. “Your optimism is encouraging. Thanks.”

He watched his friend leave before picking up the phone and dialing Porter's number, the man in charge of the grounds around his house. If Darian was right, they would need to get on the barn's construction immediately.

An hour later, he got off the phone and sighed. Thank God the man knew what needed to be done. Rafael had told him what he remembered about the animals she had. Porter informed him he'd have everything set up within two weeks. He could hear the excitement in the man's voice and was pleased. He thought the older man and Mara would get along nicely, and he trusted that he'd take care of her when he wasn't around.

His next call was to Tony.

"This is Rafael Saunders. I have some questions I need to ask you."

"Sure," Tony said.

"I'd like to bring Mara home to live with me."

"Oh."

He didn't think Tony sounded excited about it and was actually suspicious.

Rafael already knew this would happen, and he was glad the man was protective of her. "Yes. What are your questions for me?"

"Why do you want her?"

"If things work out, we'll have a relationship."

"I'm sorry, but I can't see how you could make her happy. I know you have money, but that doesn't matter to her. She'll need attention."

"I already know that."

"I can't see what a billionaire would want with a little farm girl."

"You met the women that were with us that day. All three came from different situations. None of them came from

money. She'd fit right in, and she's what I've been looking for a long time."

"What about her animals?" Tony asked.

"I'm having a barn built as we speak. The person in charge grew up on a farm, so he knows what's needed and will be around to supervise when she's with the animals."

"Oh, my. What happens if it doesn't work out?" Tony asked.

"I honestly think we'd do fine together. If by chance we don't, I'd give her choices. We could always keep her farm where you are, making her and you feel more secure."

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

"How do I go about getting to know her? I don't want to scare her, and she won't just go with me without knowing and trusting me."

"If you go in wearing an expensive suit and driving a limo, she'll run. You'll have to come down to her level a bit."

"How?"

"Get yourself some jeans and shirts. Pick up some boots and other things that make you look like a cowboy. I've got a truck you can borrow when you get here. I'll ask her if it's okay for you to stay with her for a week so you can learn about the animals."

"I have to admit, I've never touched an animal."

"Hell, this might be harder than we thought. Do you think you could?"

"Yes. I think so."

"You'll get dirty," Tony said.

Rafael rolled his eyes. "I think I'll be okay."

"Okay, let me set it up and call you back."

"Thank you."

Rafael leaned back in his chair and tried to think of other things Mara might like. He'd heard about other little's

playrooms, but he thought the barn would be her girl's playroom because he could see her spending all her time there.

He'd observe her and see what she would need. Right now, he needed to get fitted for being a cowboy.

Chapter Four

Mara rushed into the house and answered the phone.

“Hello.”

“Hello, honey, this is Tony.”

Mara relaxed and smiled. She was always afraid it was her family or the realtor. “Hi.”

“I have a strange request.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Do you remember the group of people that stopped by last week?”

“Yes. I really liked the girls.”

“They were pretty special. How about the men?” Tony asked.

“They were all intimidating. Who were they?”

Tony paused. “A group of friends that might want to move here.”

“Really?” They didn’t seem the type, but who was she to judge.

“Yes. Well, one of them asked if it was okay for him to visit.”

“Visit you?”

“No, honey, you. He wants you to teach him about the animals.”

“Why?”

“Can you believe he’s never been around any?” Tony asked.

“Like never, ever in real life?” Wow, that was crazy.

“Nope. His mother or father was allergic or something.”

“Why me?”

“He enjoyed talking to you.”

Her stomach tightened. She knew which one he was talking about and although the man scared her a little, she had thought he was very handsome. Tony wouldn't let a bad man near her.

“When would he come? How long would he stay? Would he sleep in the house?”

Tony chuckled. “Okay, let me answer them one at a time. He'd come in the next week and maybe stay for a week. He would like to stay in the house, but if it makes you uncomfortable, we can find him a motel close.”

“Oh, no. I'd hate for him to spend money when I've got an extra bed here. The only thing is ... do you really, really trust him?”

“Very much, or I wouldn't suggest it.”

That was true. Tony was very protective of her.

“Okay, let's do it. Call me when you find out he'll be here so I can get groceries.”

“All right. You be careful now.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, sir.”

Mara continued with the chores, but her thoughts kept going back to the man that was coming. She was both excited and scared at the same time.

Tony called back the next day with the news that the man would be coming in two days. That gave her plenty of time to clean the house and get groceries.

The day he was supposed to show up, she was so jumpy she couldn't concentrate. Her stomach gurgled when she heard a vehicle coming into the driveway.

She closed the door of the tack room and walked out. At first, she thought it was Tony because of the truck, but she knew she was wrong when the man got out. This man had over

six inches on Tony. The butterflies in her stomach turned into bats, making her slightly nauseous.

“Mara, are you okay?”

Her mouth snapped closed as the man came toward her with a worried look on his face.

“I ... oh ... yes. I’m sorry.” Her head tilted back when he stood in front of her. “You’re very tall.”

He grinned. “And you’re very short.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’m Mara. I know we’ve seen each other before but haven’t been introduced.”

He held out his hand. “I’m Rafael. I’m your new farmhand.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. The man wore jeans, a shirt, and boots, but she could tell they were brand new. “You didn’t have any old clothes you could wear? You’re going to get dirty.”

He looked down at himself. “No, I’m sorry. What I have isn’t appropriate, so I bought these.”

“I could have found some here. You didn’t have to spend any money.”

His mouth opened and then closed. “It’s fine. I needed these anyway.”

“Okay. I can pay you for the week.”

He shook his head. “No, baby. I’ll help where I can, but you’re doing me a favor.”

A shiver raced down her spine at the endearment. She’d never had anyone call her “baby” before, and she liked it.

“Have you eaten?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“Okay, then we’ll wait until dinner.”

“Did *you* eat?” he asked.

“Oh, well, not really. But I often go without lunch because I’m so busy out here.”

“I would like to change that. I don’t like you going without a meal. Do you need money?”

Her eyes widened. She couldn’t remember if anyone had been concerned if she had missed a meal before.

“No. I just don’t get to town often.”

“We’ll have to go soon and stock up.”

“If we get things done, we can go tonight or tomorrow.”

“That sounds good.”

“How about I show you the room you’ll be using?”

“Let me get my bag,” he said.

She waited by the door as he pulled a suitcase from the back. The thing looked expensive. From what she gathered, Rafael was a businessman, so he couldn’t afford the bag. But she was jumping to conclusions.

“Is that your luggage?” she asked.

He looked down at it. “No, I borrowed it. I’m not sure I like it.”

Mara relaxed and nodded. “This way.” She took him through the kitchen and up a flight of stairs. She pointed to one door. “That’s my room.”

He nodded.

“And this one is yours.”

She’d given him the one with the largest bed.

He set the bag on the mattress and looked around.

“I hope this is okay?”

He turned to look at her and smiled. “Yes. It’s perfect.”

She relaxed. “I’ve got more things to do outside.”

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

“You don’t have to. You just got here and must be tired.”

He smiled. “No. I’m fine. I’d like to see what you do.”

She nodded. “Okay, then follow me.”

Chapter Five

Rafael walked beside her as she introduced him to some of the animals.

They were standing by the cow, and he couldn't help but feel intimidated by its size.

She patted the thing's back. "This is Melly. She's my milk cow."

His eyes widened. "It gives you milk?"

She grinned. "Yes. That's where most milk comes from."

"Most?" he asked.

"Yes, we can get milk from goats and buffalo, as far as I know. I know there are more animals, but I can't think of them."

He looked at the cow. "You actually drink the milk?"

"Yes. It's not pasteurized, so I don't drink much, but I do make butter and cream for my coffee. It's the only way I'll drink it. The rest I give to the cats."

He had so many questions, but she was already moving on. She lifted the chain on one of the gates and let him through before closing it behind her. Rafael felt the ground vibrate and turned to see the monster from the other day trotting their way. He almost jumped back over the fence, but it stopped beside Mara and nuzzled her.

"This is Charlie. You've already met him, but he needs to meet you now."

"How?"

"Give me your hand."

He was apprehensive but did what she asked. When she held it up to the horse's mouth, he almost jerked it back.

"It's okay. He won't hurt you."

Yeah, right. One kick from the thing, and he'd have a broken bone or even be killed. He tensed when the horse sniffed his hand for a minute and then moved his lips on his palm, making it tickle.

"See. He's very sweet, and he likes you."

"How can you tell?"

"When a horse nuzzles your palm, they're saying they like you."

"That's good to know."

She smiled and moved on. "Let me introduce you to the rest." They moved to the next paddock. Here she had three more horses.

"These are some horses I rescued from bad owners or the slaughterhouse. I wish I could take them all, but it's impossible for one person."

"I can't imagine." He was tired already, and he'd only been there a few hours and hadn't done anything but follow her around and watch her feed them.

The sun was setting when she finally called it a day. She turned on the light in the kitchen and jumped. He walked around her to see a woman that looked vaguely like Mara sitting at the table drinking something. The woman stiffened when she saw him.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked.

Rafael put his hand on Mara's shoulder. "Don't tell me this is the bitchy sister, baby."

Mara's mouth dropped open before she covered it with her hands. He heard her try to hold back a giggle.

"Yes. Judith, I'd like you to meet Rafael. He's my..." She looked up at him.

"Man," Rafael said.

Mara turned red but kept her mouth shut.

"Where did she find you?" Judith asked.

He almost choked when the sister tried to come on to him. He wrapped an arm around Mara's shoulders. "We've known each other for some time, and I couldn't stay away. I just had to see her in person." Everything he was telling her was the truth. It was up to her to take it the way she wanted.

Judith's eyes narrowed. "So, you met over the Internet?"

Rafael shook his head. "No, through a mutual friend."

Judith stood and walked over to them with her hand out and a smile on her face. He looked at her hand and shook it quickly. He loved to see the resentment in the bitch's eyes.

"So, why are you here?" he asked.

"This is between my sister and me," Judith said, crossing her arms over her chest.

He looked down at Mara. "You don't care if I'm here, do you, honey?"

Mara shook her head. "Not at all. I think you should know what's going on."

He watched Judith's jaw tense when she gritted her teeth.

"Fine. Maybe you can talk some sense into her. We need to sell our house. Acreages are going for twenty percent over what it's worth right now."

One of Rafael's eyebrows rose. "Your house?"

"Well, yes."

"Does it have your name on it?"

"No, but we're sisters, and sisters should share with each other," Judith said.

He looked down to see Mara frowning at her sister. "Is that what you want, baby?"

Mara glanced up at him and shook her head.

"No."

Rafael grinned. “Well, there you have it. You’ll not get a dime of this place. I’ll make sure of it.”

Judith scowled and then brightened. “How about we go for a drink and talk about it?”

“The three of us?” he asked, knowing what she’d say.

“No. She doesn’t drink. She’s actually quite boring,” Judith said.

Rafael almost snorted. “No, thank you. I’d rather stay with my girl.”

Judith looked confused. “I’ll buy it, so you don’t have to worry about money.”

It was like she couldn’t understand why someone would want her sister and not her.

Judith smirked. “I’ll go talk to the sheriff then because she can’t throw me out of my home.”

“If you do that, I’ll go to his wife and tell her you’re fucking him,” Mara said in disgust.

Judith paled. “We’ll talk more about this later.”

There was a scratch at the door, and Mara turned toward it.

“Don’t open that fucking door,” Judith cried out and ran to the front door.

He turned to see the biggest ... dog—or he thought it was a dog—walk in and let Mara hug him. The dog’s eyes stayed trained on him.

“Rafael, I’d like you to meet Tiny.”

Rafael sputtered out a laugh. “Tiny?”

Mara grinned. “Yeah. He didn’t like the bigger names I tried to give him.”

“He understood you?”

“Of course. Let me get him fed and start our dinner. We’ll have to go to the store later.”

He wanted to help her, but he'd never touched a pan or worked on a stove before in his life. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the kitchen in any of his homes.

He realized he didn't know much about real life and would starve without his servants if he had no money to survive on his own. He watched her take a chunk of something wrapped in white paper from the freezer and pop it into the microwave. While it defrosted, she started a pan of water on the stove.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. It won't take long. I hope you like spaghetti?”

He had no idea if he did or not because he didn't think he'd ever had it before. “Sure.” There were going to be a lot of firsts for him.

She handed the dog the bone that was the size of her thigh. When his white teeth clamped down on it, a shiver of unease raced through him. This thing could kill him in a second if he wanted to.

He sat down and spread his attention between her at the stove, the dog, and the room. This whole situation was something he never thought he'd have, but he was getting more excited about it by the minute. She put a plate of what he thought was hamburger in front of the dog before she sat a plate before him and one on the opposite side of the table.

“Would you like a glass of milk?” she asked.

He couldn't bring himself to be that adventurous. “No, thank you. May I have water?”

She came back with two glasses of water and sat down. He watched her take the first bite before him to see if she ate it a special way.

The first bite took him by surprise. The tangy taste of the sauce was a burst of flavor he hadn't expected. “This is very good,” he said.

She glanced up. “It’s not homemade. I no longer have time for that, so it’s just from a bottle.”

“Wherever it came from, it’s delicious.”

“Thank you.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. When she finished, she stood and set her plate in the sink.

“Do you still want to go to the grocery store?” she asked.

“If you feel up for it.”

“All right. I’m going to change, and then I’ll be right down. Just set your plate in the sink, and I’ll wash them later.”

“Okay.” He listened to her footsteps climb the stairs. He finished the spaghetti and stood, coming to an instant stop when the dog lifted its head and looked at him. The thing didn’t growl, so he walked to the sink and set the plate on top of hers. He looked around the sink and sighed. Fortunately, she hadn’t asked him to wash because he had no clue how to do it. He walked back to the table and sat to finish his water.

Rafael turned when she came back through the kitchen doorway, and he almost swallowed his tongue. She was the cutest thing he’d ever seen. She brushed out her long blonde hair and changed into a flowery skirt and pink top.

Jesus, it floored him how his feelings for her rose exponentially at that moment. He was afraid if it didn’t work out between them, it would damage his heart for the rest of his life.

Chapter Six

Mara couldn't help glancing at him. Every move he made consumed her nervous system, and his voice made her girly parts tingle.

They pulled up to the grocery store and got out. It was the first deep breath she'd been able to take since they had left the farm. Every time she breathed in, his scent made her nervous system spark.

"Hey, honey, are you okay?" Rafael asked in concern.

She nodded and smiled. "Yes. Let's get this done."

"Okay."

They walked into the store, and she grabbed a cart. She was checking out the apples when she glanced at him. He was looking around in amazement.

"Haven't you ever been in a store before?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "Not like this one."

"That's true. You live in a big city, right?"

He nodded.

"These country stores don't have a third of the things in the grocery stores where you live. I've never seen a kiwi or pomegranates here."

He chuckled. "I think whatever we get will be fine."

She got a kick out of watching him study things, and some of his questions were hilarious.

"Is this place ever busy?"

"Yes, but during the daytime hours. That's why I always come at night."

She stiffened when they turned the corner to find the sheriff standing there like he'd been waiting for them.

"Good evening, Miss Mara."

“Hello, Sheriff.”

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Sheriff Connelly asked.

She must have shown her anxiety because Rafael stepped closer and put his arm around her.

“Rafael, I’d like you to meet our town sheriff. Sheriff Connelly, please meet Rafael, my...”

Rafael chuckled. “It will get easier to say, honey. I’m her boyfriend, for lack of a better word.”

Rafael held out a hand. The sheriff paused for a moment before reaching his hand out to shake Rafael’s.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Rafael said. “Mara and her sister had nice things to say about you.”

She had to turn her attention to her list and bite the inside of her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Well ... yes. We’ve all lived here most of our lives,” Connelly said. “Where are you from?”

“Southern Arkansas.”

“And how did you two meet?”

“A mutual friend,” he said.

Mara was getting very uncomfortable with all the questions.

“I’m sorry, Sheriff, we’d like to stay and talk, but we need to get this done and go home.”

The sheriff’s eyebrows rose. “He’s staying with you?”

Mara’s teeth snapped together. “Yes, but that is none of your business, and I don’t appreciate all the questions.”

“I’m just looking out for you, Mara.”

“If you want to make my life easier, get Judith off my back. Now, good night.”

She saw and ignored the way the sheriff paled. He didn’t like the fact people knew about the affair he was having

with her sister. It was a small town. Everyone knew everybody else's business.

They were halfway down the aisle when Rafael stopped her.

“Hey, you're shaking. Why did that upset you so much?” Rafael asked.

“He's never shown any interest in my life besides a hello now and then. He's aware of the harassment I'm getting from the realtor who wants my acreage and the way Judith pesters me, but he hasn't done anything about it. Let's not talk about it right now. I don't like people listening, and I guarantee they are.”

He chuckled. “Nobody's around us, honey. They can't hear anything.”

“If you bend down and look through the shelf to the other side, you 'll find someone's been beside us the whole time.”

Rafael bent down. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yup.” Mara bent down a bit. “Hello, Carla. I hope you're having a nice evening.”

There was a flutter of activity on the other side before the woman walked around to stand in front of them.

Mara had gone to school with Carla, and the girl had always been a nosy, horrendous gossip and a horrible flirt. The woman was pretty. She was several inches taller than Mara but had a little more weight on her bones. She wasn't fat, but she might be considered big-boned. She had short brown hair and pretty eyes. Mara thought if the woman wouldn't use all the cosmetics she did, she'd look better.

“Oh, my, I saw you in the store and wanted to stop and say hello.”

Mara bit her lip to keep from laughing when Rafael snorted.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your handsome man?”

“Um, yes. Rafael, honey, this is Carla. We were in the same grade together. Carla, this is my man, Rafael. We met through a friend and have hit it off.”

“You look like a handsome couple, but isn’t he out of your league?”

Mara exhaled. She knew the snipes would start sometime. Before she could reply, Rafael interrupted.

“Actually, I think she’s perfect for me. She’s incredibly sweet, a hard worker, smart, and gorgeous. I can’t keep my hands off her.”

It took a herculean effort not to gasp and blush. She did okay with not choking, but she’d failed to prevent herself from not turning beet red. It felt like her face was on fire.

Rafael chuckled and hugged her tighter against his body.

Carla’s eyes were wide as they went back and forth. “Oh, well, yes. She is very nice.”

“I’m sorry, Carla, we need to get this done so we can go home,” Mara said.

“Oh, yes. I hope to see you again.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” he said.

They made it a few more aisles.

“I forgot to get bread. Can you get us a loaf? Any kind of wheat will do,” she said.

“Sure.”

“It’s in the last aisle we were in.”

She watched him walk off and suddenly felt very alone. She had a sick feeling that her heart would be broken by the end of the week because if she felt this strongly for him after just a few hours, what would several days feel like?

Chapter Seven

Rafael was standing in front of the bread, contemplating which to get, when he felt a person walk up to him.

He turned. "Can I help you with anything, Sheriff?"

The man narrowed his eyes at him. "Something's off about you. I can sense it. I know she's a sweetheart, but even I can tell those boots you're wearing cost over a thousand dollars, and the jeans are the high-priced ones. So, I tell myself, what would a rich guy be doing with a little country girl giving her the impression he was poor?"

"I never said I was poor, and we've never talked about finances, Sheriff. What business is it of yours?"

"I know I've neglected the girl since Joseph, her husband, died..."

"Ya think?" Rafael growled. "She's a tiny sweet woman up against a bitch sister and a sleazy realtor trying to get her to sell."

"I've talked to both, but I could be more forceful."

"I think she'd appreciate it," Rafael said.

"Let's get back to you. I would bet a thousand dollars that you won't stay in the area. So, will she be left with a broken heart?"

Rafael shook his head. "No, I'll be taking care of her. I won't allow anyone to hurt her again."

The sheriff stared at him for a moment and then nodded. "Good." He picked up a loaf of bread. "Take this one."

"Thanks."

The sheriff started to walk off. "Hey, Sheriff." The man turned around. "I'd stop the affair and take care of that little problem because someone will have it out in public soon."

The man sighed and nodded. “The worst mistake of my life. It was one night, and we didn’t have sex. I was drunk, and we were at a bar with a group. I got blocked into a corner with her all over me. I kissed her a few times. She made a big deal out of it, so now it’s grown into this.”

“That’s good. Since it was only a few kisses, it’ll be easier to take. Hopefully, you and your wife will work it out.”

“That’s what I’m praying for.”

“Since it was more innocent than the bitch was saying, I’d tell your wife soon, so she doesn’t hear the magnified version.”

“Good advice. Thank you.”

Rafael found Mara at the checkout.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she said and laughed.

“No. There are so many different types to choose from. It took longer than it should.”

He reached for his wallet.

“It’s paid for. It’s already on the farm account,” Mara said.

“I don’t like you buying my food,” he said.

“It wasn’t that much,” she said, grabbing a few sacks.

He got the rest and followed her out to the truck. He tensed when Mara gasped and stopped suddenly.

“What?”

“Someone slashed my tires again.”

His brows rose. “Again?”

“Yes. I know it’s my sister, or she got someone else to do it for her. She thinks by harassing me, I’ll want to leave.”

“Jesus. What did the sheriff say the first time?”

“I never told him,” Mara said. She put her bags on the ground to pull her phone out of her pocket.

“Why?”

“I already went to him after the first few months, and he said it would calm down after a bit.”

“How long ago was that?”

Mara sighed. “A few years.” She held up a finger when he started to talk. “Hey, Tony. I hate to ask, but can you come and get us at the grocery store?”

Rafael heard Tony’s voice. “Dammit, she did it again.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be right there,” Tony said.

She put the phone back in her pocket. “Tony’s coming to pick us up.”

He set the sacks down and pulled her against him, holding her tight against his body.

“I’m sorry, baby. We’ll get everything figured out.”

She shook her head. “No. This is not your problem.”

“I’m making it my problem.”

She looked up at him. “You can’t just decide that.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll be gone in a week, and I’ll probably never see you again.”

“Oh, you’ll be seeing me.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Let’s talk about this later. You’ve had a long day.”

“Okay.”

She ducked her head and pressed it against his chest. The feeling of trust and affection was so potent she felt she could have cried.

He turned his head to see a truck headed their way. It stopped beside them. Tony got out and came around. Rafael saw his eyebrows rise at what he guessed was the intimacy he was seeing.

“I see you’ve hit it off,” Tony said.

Mara tried to move away, but Rafael just pulled her to the side. “I guess this is the second time this has happened?” Rafael asked.

Tony nodded. “We know it’s that bitchy sister of hers. We just can’t prove it.”

“Let’s get her home. She’s wiped out.”

“You do look a little peaked, dear,” Tony said, grabbing several bags.

“I’m fine.”

Tony snorted, making Rafael smile.

“If I hear ‘I’m fine’ one more time, I’ll scream,” Tony said.

Rafael helped her up into the truck and slid in behind her. They drove away, and he was even more determined to get her to come home with him.

Chapter Eight

Mara didn't say much as they put away the groceries. She was embarrassed about the whole situation and didn't know what to do.

In the hour they'd been gone, Rafael had been questioned by the sheriff, stalked by a busy, buzzy woman, and had to deal with her sister's crap. Now, he was trying to help but just got in the way.

She turned at the frig. "I'm sorry about tonight."

He turned to her with a look of confusion. "What?"

"Everything that happened tonight. I'm sorry you had to deal with it. Fortunately, I think we got enough food from the store to last all week unless Judith shows up and eats it."

"She's done that?"

"Yeah, a lot. But if we need anything, I'll run in by myself."

"The hell you will," he said. "I don't feel comfortable with you here by yourself."

She snorted. "There's nothing you can do about it. You'll be gone in a week. I've dealt with it this long on my own. I can do it all by myself."

Rafael walked over and grasped her shoulders. "What if you didn't have to do it alone?"

"What does that mean? You're going to move in with me for good?" she said and laughed.

"No, but you could move in with me."

Her mouth dropped open and then snapped shut. "You don't live around here, so how would that work?"

"Just think about it."

"I have all the animals and won't give them up."

“What if there was a place to house them, very close to the house I live in?”

It was too much to take in at the moment. If there was a possibility, would she leave her hometown?

“Can we sleep on this? I really am tired, and I can’t think straight.”

“Sure. I just wanted the idea in your head so you could think about it.”

Yeah, like she’s liable to forget this conversation. “I’ll have questions later.”

“You can ask me anything.”

“Let’s go to bed.” She could feel the blush burn her face. “I meant in different bedrooms, of course.”

He chuckled. “I knew what you meant, honey.”

She relaxed and smiled. “Go on up while I check the windows and doors.”

“No, I’ll lock up everything while you shower and get some rest.”

“But you don’t know how the locks work.”

He laughed. “I think I can figure it out.”

“Oh, okay. Let me call for Tiny.”

“He sleeps in the house?”

“Yes. He sleeps with me. He makes me feel safe.”

She could tell he didn’t like hearing that.

“Tiny,” she yelled out the back door. She grinned when he ran up with his tongue out. “Are you ready for bed, baby?”

He huffed and walked into the house. She shut and locked the door.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she called out as she walked up the stairs.

“Good night, honey.”

Mara got to her room and grabbed her nightgown and robe before walking down the hall and into the bathroom. She started to undress and paused. This was the first time she'd be naked around a man she found attractive. It was a bit nerve-racking, but she couldn't go without a shower.

She pinned her hair up and stepped into the shower. The heat from the water did a lot for soothing the taunt muscles in her neck and shoulders, and helped ease the headache she'd had most of the day. After turning off the shower, she dried herself and slathered lotion all over her body. She dressed in her nightclothes and brushed her teeth. She was trying to hurry because she assumed he also wanted to shower before bed.

She creaked open the door and peeked out. When she didn't see or hear anything, she made a run to her bedroom. Her whole body shuddered when she ran into a wall of muscle. Rafael quickly grabbed hold of her shoulders to steady her, thankfully, so she didn't end up on her ass.

“Whoa, honey. Why the rush?”

“Oh, well, I thought you'd want the bathroom.”

“Thank you. I would like to shower before bed. It smells like you did, too. You smell very sweet.”

“Oh, is that good or bad?”

He chuckled. “Oh, honey, that's good. Very good.”

“Oh.” Hell, she sounded like an idiot saying “oh.” But she was speechless about what to do or say.

His smile gentled. “Go to bed. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Um, yeah, okay.” She was able to step back when he released her and walked into her bedroom. After closing the door, she leaned her forehead against it and took several deep breaths.

Tiny was staring at her when she turned. “Yeah, I know I'm an idiot.”

Fortunately, he couldn't respond.

Ten minutes later, she lay staring up at the ceiling when her body desperately needed sleep, but her mind wouldn't turn off.

Mara was thinking about when Rafael had shown up. When she took him around the barns and the rest of the area, she could tell he was extremely uncomfortable but became more relaxed as time passed.

The light from the moon crept across the floor. She turned to face the window, tucked her hands under her cheek, and closed her eyes. She'd have to think about what would happen at the end of the week the next day because her body was shutting down for the night.

Chapter Nine

The following few days were almost torture for her. She loved getting to know Rafael and working with him, but her body was in a continuous aching desire, and she had no idea what to do with or about it.

It didn't help that every chance he got, he was touching her in some way. They'd watch a movie the last few nights after dinner and before bedtime. They always ended up smashed together on the sofa. She didn't know if it was her or him who moved closer during the movie.

Mara was jolted out of her daydream when Charlie nudged her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, buddy. Was I ignoring you?" she laughed when he nodded his head.

Her head turned toward the road when she heard an awful thump and then a truck racing off. She went out into the driveway and saw a big pile of something in the middle of the road. She made her way there, and the closer she got, the more her stomach tightened. She stood looking down at Tiny. It took her a moment to comprehend what she was seeing. He'd been run over and left there to die. She screamed as she fell to the ground and lifted the dog's head onto her lap.

Sobs were tearing from her throat. "Nooo!"

"Fuck," Rafael said when he ran up to them.

She heard him talking as she held one of the most precious things in her life. He'd saved her from so much, not only from the people that harassed her but from the loneliness and sadness that caught her every so often.

"Please don't die, Tiny. I need you so much. Please. I promise I'll take better care of you."

Mara had no idea how long she sat there crying, begging Tiny to come back even though she knew it was impossible. She didn't notice the truck that rolled up to them and parked.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony said. “I don’t have to be told what happened.”

She looked up at her other best friend. “Tony, they took Tiny from me.”

Tony placed his hand on her head. “I know, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

The men stood with her and talked quietly together, giving her time with the dog.

“Hey, sweetheart. When you’re ready, how about we bury him by the pond? He loves it down there.”

Her tears had slowed to a trickle, but her grip just tightened around Tiny’s head.

“Can’t we try to take him to the vet?” she cried.

Tony sighed. “Honey, you know there’s nothing they can do for him. We also can’t leave him laid out because it’s so hot out ... well, you know what will happen.”

She knew, but she just felt so helpless at that moment and didn’t want to make any decisions.

She looked up at Rafael. “What should I do?”

He squatted beside her and smoothed her hair off her face. “I think we should do what Tony suggested. You know he’d pick the best place he could for him.”

She nodded. “You’re right.”

“I’ll go grab a blanket and some shovels,” Tony said, walking off.

She started sobbing again. “Rafael, what am I going to do without him? He was the best friend I’ve ever had.”

She felt his hand pet the back of her head.

“I’ll have to be your new best friend, and don’t forget Tony.”

It was a nice thought, but neither would work. “That won’t happen. Tony has his wife and farm to care for, and you’ll leave in four days.”

“I think we can figure something out. I know I don’t want to go a day without seeing you, and that won’t change,” Rafael said.

Tony was back with a blanket and shovels. He laid the shovels in the back of his truck and then walked over to them.

“How about Rafael and me help you wrap him in the blanket and lift him into the back of the truck?”

“I guess that would be okay. I want to hold him so he’s not alone.”

“Of course, I’ll sit in the back with you,” Rafael said.

She looked up at him and nodded. “That would be nice.”

Both men covered the animal and lifted him into the back of Tony’s truck.

The drive down a back road to the pond on the back of her property seemed like it took days instead of minutes because Tony had to drive so slowly. But she was glad because she wanted as much time with Tiny as possible.

They pulled up, and he parked in the shade. The men got out and dug a deep hole. The whole time she cradled the dog, cried, and sang to him. She felt a warm body beside her and a hand on her upper back.

“The hole is ready whenever you are, baby,” Rafael said.

Mara nodded, pressed her face into the dog’s fur, and said a little prayer. She also asked her father up in Heaven to take care of him for her. She thought the two of them would get along really well.

She lifted her head and nodded. “I’m ready.”

The men lifted Tiny off her lap and gently carried him to the hole, lowering him into it. She stood looking down at him with her arms wrapped around her waist and tears cascading down her cheeks.

“Would you like me to say a prayer?” Tony asked.

She nodded. She vaguely heard the words he was saying, but she was silently begging Tiny to get up. She knew it was impossible, but she did it anyway.

Someone touched her shoulder.

“What do you want us to do now?” Tony asked.

“I don’t want to see you cover him. Is it all right if I walk back home? I’ll come back later.”

“That’s fine, sweetheart,” Tony said. “Rafael will follow you.”

She shook her head. “No, I want him here.” She looked at him. “Is that okay if you help Tony? I just need a few minutes to myself.”

“Sure, honey. We’ll be home as soon as we can.”

Mara nodded, took one more look at Tiny, turned, and walked away. The walk took a while because she walked all over the land she owned before she headed toward the barn.

She climbed up on Charlie and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Oh, Charlie, what are we going to do?” she cried until nothing was left.

The world was forever broken because she lost her friend, and she never thought she would be whole or feel happy again.

Chapter Ten

Rafael patted the last shovel of dirt on top of the grave before leaning on it. He thanked God he worked out, or he would have collapsed by now. He also knew his hands would never be the same. He had blisters on top of blisters, and they stung.

Tony caught him looking at them.

“Oh, hell, I’m sorry. Your hands must be a mess.”

“This is nothing compared to what that woman is going through.”

“Let’s head back,” Tony said.

They threw the shovels in the back of Tony’s truck and slid into the cab. He looked over at the other man.

“You saw it, right?”

Tony nodded. “How can people be so mean?”

Rafael looked out his window as he thought about the chunk of meat that was lying on the pavement. He guessed it was their way to get the dog out in the middle of the street so they could run him over. “I’m going to make them pay dearly.”

“I’m right there with you. Do we tell her what we found?”

Rafael shook his head. “No. It’s one betrayal she would never forget. Did you get rid of the meat?”

“Yeah. I threw it into the ditch across from the mailbox. After I drop you off and see how she’s doing, I’ll talk to Buck, the sheriff. He better do something about this.”

Rafael sighed. “What can he do? We can’t prove it was her sister.”

“No, but I guarantee that bitch didn’t do the dirty work, so the sheriff can hopefully find the driver and charge him with something. Hell, that dog had to have done some damage to the vehicle, so the sheriff has something to go on. Maybe

the guy could inform the sheriff about whose plan it was to kill the dog.”

“We’ll see, I’ll think of something.”

They pulled up and parked. He looked toward the house and saw it was dark.

“She’ll be with the animals. Most likely Charlie.”

Rafael looked toward the barn. “Let’s go.”

They walked through the main barn and around the corner to see Mara on top of Charlie, petting him and crying.

Rafael sighed.

“I’m going to get her inside and bathed.”

Tony nodded. “I’ll go talk to Buck.”

He waited for Tony to leave before walking up to the horse and setting a hand on Mara’s leg.

“Hi, honey. How are you doing?”

“It hurts so bad,” she cried. “I’m dying. It’s like I can’t take a breath, and the pain is never-ending.”

“No, baby. It maybe feels like it. I swear to you that every passing day will get a little easier.”

“I’ll never forget him,” she said.

“Of course not.” He stood and rubbed her leg, trying to give her as much comfort as he could. “Tell me when you’re ready, and I’ll take you inside.”

“Can I stay here tonight?”

He shook his head. “No, baby. But I promise I’ll hold you as long as you want me to.”

She wiped her eyes and looked at him. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Even if it’s hours and hours?”

“Baby, I’ll hold you for days and weeks if that’s what you need.”

She sat up and patted Charlie's neck before looking at him and holding her arms out. That simple gesture made his heart feel ten times its regular size and made him fall a little more in love with her.

Rafael carried her inside the house and up the stairs. He started the shower and turned to take her clothes off. It concerned him when she just stood there docile as he got her naked.

“Do you need me in there with you, baby?”

She looked around. “No. I think I'm okay.”

“All right. I'll get your nightgown for you. Call out if you need me. I'll be here.”

She nodded.

He walked out of the bathroom, down to her bedroom, and stared at her mattress. Fuck. She wouldn't be able to sleep in that bed, maybe not ever. He reminded himself it wouldn't matter in a few days because she'd be with him.

Rafael started to grab for the white nightgown when he saw his hands. Hell. They were black with dirt and blood, and the open sores on his hands oozed some kind of liquid.

He smiled. His friends would never believe it if they saw him there at that moment. There was no way he'd be touching her gown with his hands the way they were. Back in the bathroom, he scrubbed his hands, hissing when he touched all the blisters.

“How are you doing, baby?”

“Fine.”

He sighed. Tony warned him that she always said that no matter what. He carefully dried off his hands and looked for bandages in the drawers. After finding what he needed, he slapped a few on and then went back for the nightgown.

When he got back, the shower was turned off.

Rafael grabbed a large towel and then slid the shower curtain over. He wrapped it around her and lifted her out of the

tub to sit on the toilet. He grabbed another towel and started on her hair.

“Do you put anything in your hair after a shower?”

She nodded and pointed to a purple spray bottle.

He sprayed it over her hair and then dragged a comb through it as he blow-dried it. She had such pretty, long blonde hair, and he enjoyed running his fingers through it as he dried it.

After drying her hair, he pulled the gown over her head and carried her into his room.

“Baby, I’m going to shower quickly. I want you to rest until I come for you.”

She nodded, looked behind her at the mattress, and then lay down, curling up on her side and tucking her knees to her chest.

Goddamn, she looked so tiny, broken, and helpless. It made him want to get his hands around her sister’s neck even more.

Rafael grabbed the sweatpants and t-shirt he wore to bed. As much as it drove him crazy to wear anything because he liked being naked when he slept, he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable with him.

He lifted his face up to the water spray and closed his eyes. He couldn’t get the picture out of his mind of her standing naked in front of him. Her breasts were medium-sized and would fit into his palm nicely, with the prettiest pink tits he’d ever seen.

Mara had rounded hips and thighs and tiny feet. Although small, he could see the muscle definition she got from working on the farm. This first time seeing her naked was a picture he would never forget.

Chapter Eleven

He finished and hurriedly dressed and slapped a new bandage on the blisters on his hands. She was in the exact same place he had left her. He lay down beside her and stroked her arm.

“Hey, do you want to stay up here and cuddle or go down and watch a movie?”

“And cuddle?” she asked hopefully.

“Of course.” He smiled.

“A movie, I think.”

“A movie it is.” He stood, picked her up, carried her down to the living room, and sat her on the sofa. “I’m going to lock up and get us some popcorn and soda.”

She nodded without looking at him.

Rafael returned within seven minutes with the food, blanket, and pillow. “Let’s get you situated so you’re comfortable.”

He moved the sofa table closer and sat everything within easy reach. Afterward, he placed the pillow against the armrest, put his back to it, and straightened his legs. He lifted her, sat between them with her back against his chest, and then covered them with the blanket. He went through some channels until he came to a Disney movie that she enjoyed and was upbeat.

“Here, baby. Can we put the bowl of popcorn on your lap so we can both reach it?”

Mara nodded and arranged it, so it was steady.

He watched her face. Before that day, she had smiled at certain places in the movie, but now there was this vague look in her eyes like she wasn’t really seeing it.

They went through most of the popcorn and soda and then cuddled down on the sofa with his head on the pillow and

hers on his chest.

Halfway through the movie, he noticed her breathing even out and deepen. Good, she needed the sleep.

He turned off the TV and ensured the blanket was over her before closing his eyes and sleeping. Her moving and whimpers woke him a few hours later.

“Shhh, baby. You’re with Rafael.”

She turned her face against his chest and started crying. He got worried when she started gagging, and it didn’t seem to stop.

Rafael kept rubbing her back, murmuring soft words to her, and wiping up the tears and snot on her face. Finally, after what seemed like an hour, she fell back to sleep.

He stared up at the ceiling. Everything he’d done since he got here was so out of his realm of knowledge and comfort that he was pretty surprised he hadn’t broken but had gone with the flow. He’d never cleaned someone as they cried. Hell, he doubted he’d ever touched snot before because he’d never been sick, and he certainly never cried.

She woke him up with two more crying episodes, so he was wiped out by the time the sun started over the horizon. It didn’t matter if she needed the sleep because they had to get up and care for the animals. She’d feel bad if she neglected them.

He started rubbing her back. “Baby, we have to get up and take care of the animals.”

She immediately started moving. When she lifted her head, he could see her eyes were still swollen and her face blotchy, but she was the most beautiful thing in the world to him. He smoothed her hair from her face.

“Good morning, baby.”

She blinked a few times. “Good morning.” She looked out the window and gasped. “Oh, God, Melly must be hurting. I should have milked her an hour ago.”

“Easy,” he said. “How about you start the coffee, and I get us clothes for the day?”

She nodded.

He lifted her to her feet and watched her rush into the kitchen. A groan tore from his throat when he stood, and a muscle cramped in his back. He was definitely not going to sleep on the bastard sofa again.

Upstairs, he got dressed, grabbed some clothes for her, and went down to find her looking out the window in the door with her arms around her waist like she was hugging herself.

“Here, baby, get dressed, then we’ll get outside.”

Mara nodded, reached for the clothing, and walked into another room. When she returned, he was waiting by the back door with two mugs in his hands. He held one out to her.

“Here you go. Just the way you like it. I only filled it halfway so you wouldn’t burn yourself.”

“Okay.”

Rafael followed her out, and they immediately went to the cow with the clean bucket she grabbed as she left the house. He could tell the cow was unhappy and uncomfortable by how it moaned and wouldn’t stop.

“I’m here, Melly.” She patted her side and sat on the stool they had out in the barn just for milking. Mara put the bucket under the udders and got the milk out and relief to the cow. It took longer because she kicked a few times because it was unpleasant initially. But Mara would soothe her and start again.

“I’ll take this into the kitchen and pour it in the crock while you feed the chickens,” he said.

“Okay.”

It was like she was running on autopilot, but he didn’t push her to rest for the time being.

When he returned from caring for the milk, she fed the chickens, goats, and cats. So now she only needed to get to the

donkey and horses. He'd lifted a bag of food she needed and put it away without conversation.

After the animals were fed and watered, they tackled the stalls. It was one of his least favorite things. The worst was the chicken coop. God, he didn't think anything smelled that bad. He returned to the barn to see her saddling one of the horses.

"Baby, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to go check out the grave. I won't be gone long."

"I don't like it."

Mara sighed and turned toward him. "I promise I'll be safe. It helps me when I'm on a horse. It settles me. Can you ride?"

"No." *Dammit.*

"You'll be able to see me the whole time if you stand on the fence at the corner of the barn. I always hold onto the gutter."

"I want you back."

"I will."

He nodded and watched her effortlessly mount the horse and walk out of the barn.

Rafael raced to the place she told him, and she was right. He could see her clearly, and since he was so tall, he could sit against the barn roof and watch her.

Mara slowly rode down the hill and dismounted by the grave they had just made the day before. She sat by it for the longest time. He breathed a sigh of relief when she finally returned to the horse and started back home. He held his breath because she was going faster than she had gone to the grave.

Rafael didn't relax until she was in the barn and off the horse. Jesus, she wasn't even his yet, and she was already giving him gray hair.

Chapter Twelve

Mara could see the mound of dirt and instantly, after leaving the barn, started crying. When she knelt by Tiny's grave, she set her hand on top of the hill of dirt.

"I'm so sorry. I should have taken better care of you. You were such a good friend, and I loved you so much. I will miss you, my friend, until the day I die."

She set her head down and cried until she had no tears left.

"I will bring back a bone for you when I visit next. Who will I have to sleep with? It was nice having you in bed. It made me feel less alone."

Mara sighed, stood, and looked around. Tony had picked the perfect place. The grave was under a grove of trees that surrounded a small pond. Tiny used to love to come down and swim around on a hot day. The grass was green and lush with wildflowers scattered about. If she could, she'd want her grave to be here, too.

She got on the horse and headed back to the house. When she caught sight of Rafael, she nudged the horse to go faster, cantering home. He was striding into the barn when she dismounted. He pulled her into his arms as soon as she hit the ground and held her for a long moment.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"A little."

"It will take time."

She nodded and wrapped her arms around his waist. God, she was going to miss him.

"Do you think you could eat something, baby?"

Her stomach twisted at the thought, but she knew she needed it. "I'll try."

"Come on. I'll make you my specialty."

She leaned back and looked at him. “You only know how to make sandwiches.”

“Yeah, that’s my specialty.”

She couldn’t help grinning because he was so proud of himself. He had tried canned soup but had burnt it, and his toast was getting close to being edible.

“How about you start to the house while I take the saddle off Stormy?”

“That’s fine. I’ll get everything on the table.”

She nodded and turned toward the horse. She took in the sounds of the animals, and it helped soothe her as nothing else could.

Mara was finished with the horse and on her way to the house when her sister pulled in. She groaned. Her sister was the last person she wanted to deal with.

“Hey, sister.”

Mara snorted and stopped a few feet away. “What do you want?”

Her sister looked around. “This place wouldn’t be half bad if you got rid of the animal buildings and painted the house.”

“I’ll think about it. Was there anything else?”

Her sister crossed her arms over her chest and smiled smugly. She pretended to look around. “Where’s that mangy mut of yours?”

Mara studied her sister and knew without a doubt her sister had something to do with killing Tiny.

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll come after you?” Mara asked.

There was no fear on her sister’s face, but she had been terrified of him a few days ago.

“No. I got over my fear of him.”

Mara could feel a huge wave of fury unlike she’d ever known before. She had never felt violent about anything in her

life, but at that moment, she wanted to rip her sister's head off.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

Her sister had a fake look of surprise on her face.

"Mwaw?" Judith said and tapped her chest.

Mara was barely holding it together, but she wanted her sister to say it.

"What reason would you have to kill an animal?"

The forced shock came down and showed her sister's mouth twisting into a snarl. "Because that damn mutt was between me and my house."

Mara saw red, screamed, and lunged at Judith, slamming her to the ground. Mara sat on top of her and railed at her.

"You fucking bitch, whore!" Mara kept screaming as she punched her sister as hard as possible. "You're nothing to me. If you come near me again, I'll fucking kill you."

"Oh, hell," she heard behind her, but it didn't stop her from fighting.

She was suddenly lifted off her sister. She struggled against the hold because she wanted to go at her sister again.

"Enough," Rafael said.

"No. She killed my dog. I want to hurt her so much."

"I understand that. You did a pretty good job of it. Her face is all swollen and bloody. I think you broke her nose."

"It doesn't matter. I want to take her head off. I want to hurt her as much as I am now. She said she killed tiny because *he was between her and her house.*"

Rafael turned Mara to the side and gave her a hard smack on her ass. That's all it took to settle her down and relax against him.

"That's a good girl. I want you to go into the house," he said.

She shook her head and tried to pull away from him to get to her again. “No! Please, just a little bit longer.”

Rafael shook his head and pointed to the house. “Now.”

She sneered at her sister. “You come near me or my house, I will fuck you up. You are no longer my sister. You are dead to me.”

Mara turned and walked into the house and up to the bathroom. She stripped and then jumped into the shower. She lifted her face up to the water and let it wash away the tears.

Chapter Thirteen

Rafael reached down and yanked the woman up by her arm.

“Hey!” Judith said. “You’re hurting my arm.”

He dragged her to her car, opened the door, and shoved her in.

“Oh my God, she went crazy,” Judith screamed. “Look what she did to my face.”

“That’s nothing compared to what I’ll do to you.”

Judith pulled down the visor and groaned. She pulled some tissues from her purse and tried wiping away the blood, but it just smeared.

“I’m getting her charged with assault. That little bitch is going to pay.”

He gripped her chin, turned her to face him, and tightened his hold when she tried to pull away from him. “Listen to me carefully, you fucking piece of shit. Any enjoyment you’ve gotten out of your life ends today. You fucked with my woman. Now, I’m going to fuck with you. I’ll give you and your mother twenty-four hours to get out of town and never show your face here again.”

Judith snorted. “How do you think you’re going to accomplish that?”

“I’m buying the house you live in, and if you try to move into another, I’ll buy that too.”

She laughed. “Oh, and where are you going to get the money for that, big talker?”

He grinned. “I’ve got more money than you can imagine, so I have the means to destroy you.”

Judith rolled her puffy eyes. “Ohhh, you’re so scary,” she said sarcastically.

He chuckled. “Go ask Tony. He’ll tell you who I am. I can buy islands if I want them. Today, my mission is to make your life as miserable as I can. Now, get away from here, and go home. Oh, and tell your bitch of a mom to pack her bags. Remember, twenty-four hours, or I’ll have the state police run you out.”

He slammed the door hard enough to make the vehicle rock.

“Hey,” Judith yelled through the open window.

He turned to look at her.

“What are you doing with my sister?”

He smiled. “She will get whatever she wants for the rest of her life. She’s going to live in a castle and visit anyplace she wants. She’s going to be my princess, and you’re going to be nothing. Now, leave.”

She started to pull out. “I’m going to the sheriff.”

“Go ahead. You’ll be charged when he finds out you killed Mara’s dog.”

“He won’t do that. He’s a special friend of mine,” Judith said.

“Whore, the only thing you did was kiss him. He’s nothing to you and hates you as much as I do. Cut your losses and get out of town.”

The car squealed out of the driveway.

Before going into the house, he watched it until it was out of sight. He heard the shower running upstairs and walked up to the bathroom.

Rafael heard her crying and wanted to hurt her sister even more. He grabbed for a towel, pushed the curtain aside, and turned off the water before reaching for her. He sat on the toilet with her on his lap, holding her tightly against his chest as she cried. When she finally settled, he set her on her feet and dried her body. He sat her down on the counter and worked on her hair.

“I want to hurt her so badly. I’ve never wanted to hit anyone in my life, but what I felt outside was a rage I had no idea I was capable of.” She looked up at him. “Do you think that makes me a bad person?”

He set the comb down and cupped her face in his hands. “Absolutely not. What she did was horrendous, and I want her to be hurt every day for the rest of her life.”

“I do, too.”

He wasn’t going to say he would make it happen. She had enough on her mind. “Let’s get you dressed.”

She nodded. When he sat her on the bed with only a towel, the trust she had for him made him feel emotions he never had before, and he couldn’t describe or name what they were.

“I can wear the same clothes I had on. They’re still clean enough, and I have work outside still,” she said.

“Let me get you new underwear and socks. I’ll go get them.”

He was back within a minute and helping her get dressed. The fact that she stood and let him do anything told him her mental state was still broken. Rafael changed his wet t-shirt, picked her up, and brought her downstairs.

“I want you to eat, even if it’s a piece of bread and a glass of milk,” he told her.

She nodded and reached for the loaf of bread. He grabbed a few glasses and filled one with water because he still couldn’t bring himself to try Melly’s milk, and a glass of milk for Mara.

Mara picked apart the bread but got a few bites in and drank her whole glass of milk.

“What do you want to do after lunch?” he asked.

“We can check on the animals.”

He nodded. “Okay.” After he put the food away, he reached out a hand which she took immediately.

They walked around for a while and then rested on some hay bales.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

He snorted, making her look at him.

“What?”

“Tony told me that’s what you say no matter what. It’s something we’ll work on because I need you to be able to tell me if you’re hurting.”

“Why does it matter?” she asked.

“Everything about you matters to me, honey.”

“You’re only going to be here another two days,” she reminded him.

He cradled her hand and studied how delicate it looked in his palm. “That is something I wanted to discuss with you, but I was waiting for the right time. This time is as good as any.”

“What?”

He inhaled. “I want you to come home with me.”

She stared at him for a long time like she hadn’t heard him.

“But ... I can’t. I have a house and my animals here.”

“I’ve already taken care of everything. Remember, I told you what I’m doing. You’ll keep the house for as long as you want, but you’ll live with me. I had an area made into a place you can keep the animals, and if you need to take on more, there are acres we can use.”

God, please make her say yes because there was no way he would leave her behind, and getting his things done from the farm would be next to impossible.

Chapter Fourteen

Shock froze her muscles but scrambled her brain.

“You want me to go home with you ... like, to live?”

“Yes.”

“In the same house?”

“Yes.”

Her brows pinched together in confusion. “Will I be a maid or something?”

“You’ll be my woman. Your only responsibility will be to obey me and take care of your animals.”

She probably should have taken exception to the “obey” part, but she realized she’d been obeying him from the first day he was here, and it seemed natural.

“You have a barn?”

“Yes. You’ll have everything you’ll ever need or want.”

“I can always sell the milk and eggs for extra money.”

He squeezed her hand. “No, baby. I don’t want you to ever worry about that.”

She stared down at their hands. His were so much bigger than hers and hard. She noticed the nicks and calluses he had, and if she remembered correctly, his hands had been softer than hers. She decided she liked them better right now.

“I don’t want you to spend money on me. Joseph, my late husband, left a good amount of it, so I don’t have to worry about paying the bills.”

“I’ll tell you as often as you need to hear it, but I have enough money to last us through ten lifetimes. Probably a lot more.”

Mara smiled a bit. She’d never heard him exaggerate, but it made her feel special that he’d make everything seem

better to get her to go home with him.

“Okay,” she said to make him feel better. “What about the animals? How will we get them there?”

“I’m having trailers with several experienced people load them and take them to your new farm.”

It seemed inconceivable to her. “Do you realize how much work that is?”

He smiled. “Yes.”

“Are these friends of yours?”

He looked confused. “No.”

“Then they’re doing you a favor?” she asked.

“We can say that.”

That confused her. “When would this happen?”

“As soon as tomorrow,” he said.

Her mouth dropped open. “But we’ll need several trailers. How long is the drive?”

“Seven to eight hours.”

“So, we could do it in one day?”

He nodded.

That will help. “Will these people listen to me?”

“Of course.”

“God, I don’t know. What if you decide you don’t like me?” she asked.

“Do you trust me?”

She nodded automatically because she had from the start.

“Okay. Don’t freak on me.”

She wondered what that meant when he lifted her over his lap with her legs on either side and facing each other. Her hands immediately went to his shoulders.

He cupped her face. "If anything scares you, tell me."

Mara nodded.

He lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers. Her body softened and leaned against his. One of his hands cupped the back of her head while the other one went to her back to hold her tightly against him.

Rafael lifted his head. "Open your mouth, baby."

She did immediately and then groaned when his tongue pushed into her mouth and caressed the inside.

He lifted his head again. "Jesus, baby, we'll set the sheets on fire."

Mara gasped. That didn't sound very good. "Oh, no."

He chuckled. "No, that's very, very good. It sounds like your husband wasn't good."

Her brows puckered. "At what?"

He got a weird look on his face, and then the flush of desire seemed to deepen.

"Kissing and sex?"

She snorted. "We never did that."

He looked shocked. "Why?"

"Don't tell anyone, but Joseph was gay." She stopped and grinned.

"He barely kissed me when we got married. He married me to take care of his mother, who was ill, and the house. I promised I would never say anything."

Mara studied his face and couldn't decipher what he was thinking. "What's wrong? What we did wasn't illegal at all. I swear."

His expression softened. "I know that, honey."

"Okay, good. You looked a little mad or something."

He pressed his lips against her forehead. "No. Not at all. I was just surprised."

“Joseph called it a marriage of convenience. As long as it got me out of my mother’s house, I didn’t care.”

She would forever remember that feeling when she walked out the door of the only home she’d had, knowing she’d never be back. Freedom had been a bandage for her soul.

Chapter Fifteen

Jesus. Rafael couldn't get past the fact that she was a virgin. He'd be the only one to have this sweet woman. No other man would ever touch her. Hell, if he thought he was possessive before, now the emotion knew no bounds.

"How about another kiss, and then we'll do the chores? I think we should make an early night of it."

"We're not really leaving tomorrow, are we?" she asked.

"As much as I want to, I don't want to rush you. We'll get it set up to go early the following morning."

"I'll have to come up with a plan."

He caressed her arm. "For what?"

"How everything will go."

He smiled. "I'm going to have you meet Porter. He's going to help you with the farm. He lives very close to the barn and knows a lot about the animals. I think both of you will work well together. He's coming and will be with the trailers the whole time."

"That's fine. I'd like the help."

Rafael smoothed the hair from her face. "After loading them, you'll go with me, and he'll ride with the caravan."

"Why can't I go with them? What if one of the animals needs me?"

His hand ran up and down her back in a soothing motion. "Baby, Porter grew up on a farm and has worked with these types of animals before."

"But..."

"No buts. Trust me." He studied her as she thought about it for a moment and then relaxed when she nodded.

"Good girl. Besides, this will give you a few hours to get used to the farm."

“That’s true. I’ll be able to get food and water ready and see where I want them to go.”

He nodded. “Now for a kiss.”

His lips took hers a little more forcefully that time because he wanted her to get used to his touch. When she started rubbing against him, he lifted his head.

“It’s getting too far, honey. Our first time making love is not going to be on a hay bale.”

She looked surprised and then down at the hay, like seeing it for the first time. “We ... really?”

“Yes. This is where it’s going, honey. Tell me now if this isn’t what you want when we get home.”

“No, I do. I want it so much I could scream.”

He smiled. “Well, our first time together is not going to be in a place that pokes or scratches your butt cheeks.”

She smiled. Right then, he knew she’d be all right and would eventually get over the loss of her friend and her sister’s betrayal. However, the memories would never dissipate.

“When is our first time going to be?” she asked innocently.

“When it’s the right time.”

If his cock got any harder, it would be poking through his jeans. He lifted her up to her feet, held her steady, and stood in front of her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Let’s get the chores done. We have some packing to do tonight. But we have tomorrow, so we don’t have to rush.”

The animals were taken care of. Now they could concentrate on packing, although she wouldn’t need much because he wanted to buy her everything. He also wanted to use every bit of time for her to get used to his touches and domineering ways.

They made sandwiches that they got to finish this time. He noticed how Mara would look at the freezer where she stored Tiny's bones. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist as she stood looking out the back door. She looked so lost and lonely he couldn't take it another moment. "How are you holding up?"

"I think I'm okay. Before we leave, I want to take a bone to him."

"Of course. Just tell me when and if you want me with you. Just ask."

She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. "I'm glad you're here with me."

He pressed his lips against her temple. "I'm glad, too. How about we get some of the things you want to take packed? You won't need a lot because I'll get whatever you need."

"Oh, I don't want you to spend money on me. I've got enough of everything."

He rolled his eyes behind her head so she couldn't see. There was no way he wouldn't pay an extravagant amount to make this woman happy.

They walked up the steps and stopped at her bedroom door. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Do you want me to get your things, and then we can pack them in my room?"

She inhaled and shook her head. "No. I can do this."

"I'll be right with you. Just tell me what to do."

"Okay."

It took an hour to pack the clothes and things, and they put them by the back door to be loaded onto one of the trailers. The two walked through the rooms, checked and locked everything but the back door, and ensured she had everything she wanted. He tried to get her to leave some clothing behind, but she said she was comfortable with the ones she was taking. He could see she was getting overwhelmed, so he let it go.

"How about I make us dinner?" he said.

She looked at him. “How?”

“Don’t they have a pizza delivery here?”

She laughed. “Yes. I can’t remember the last time I had it.”

“Is it any good?”

“I thought so.”

“Tell me what kind you like, and then give me the number.”

Forty-five minutes later, a car pulled up, and a teenage boy got out with two boxes.

Rafael paid the kid and grinned when he heard the yell from the guy when he realized what tip was given. He bet he had never had a hundred-dollar gift before.

Mara had plates and forks on the table and poured two glasses of water when he set the two boxes on the table. He opened hers and made a face.

“What?” she asked.

“Who gets a pizza with just cheese on it?” he asked disgustingly.

He opened his own and heard her gasp.

“Rafael, all that is meat. Are you trying to have a heart attack?”

He laughed and yanked her into his arms. “I don’t get this very often, so I go all out when I do.” He leaned back to see her face. “Okay?”

She wrinkled her nose and nodded.

“Good.” He pressed a kiss to her lips and sat down.

They ate pizza, watched a movie, and cuddled on the sofa, and it was one of the most peaceful times he could remember having. He needed to make a conscious effort to do this with her at least once a week when they got home.

Chapter Sixteen

Mara leaned back against Rafael's chest. That would have been the perfect night if it weren't for her underlying grief. Being with him was so easy.

He stood and turned off the TV. "Go up, brush your teeth, and then get into my bed."

"I'm sleeping with you?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?" he asked.

She shook her head. She was actually thrilled because she wasn't looking forward to sleeping in her bed without Tiny.

Mara pulled on her nightgown and brushed her teeth before climbing into his bed and pulling the blanket up to her chin. She heard him roam through the house checking windows and doors and then up the stairs. He stepped into the room and grabbed his sweats.

"I'm going to shower and be right in."

"Okay."

He turned off the overhead light but left the door to the hallway open to let the light into the bedroom.

She was dozing when he walked back in. He had a shirt in his hands.

"Baby, do you care if I don't wear a shirt? I'll keep my sweatpants on?" he asked.

"Of course. I want you comfortable."

"I'll get really comfortable when we get home."

Her eyes roamed over him. He had a light patch of hair in the middle of his chest and around his belly button before a line of it disappeared into his pants. Rafael was muscular but not nearly like a weightlifter. She could have looked at him for hours.

“Honey, you need to stop staring at me like you want to eat me up.”

Her gaze flew to his face, and she felt her own heat with a blush. “I’m sorry.”

He lifted the covers, slid in, and then propped his head on his palm. “Don’t be sorry. I love your eyes on me, but I want us to wait for our first time when we get in my bed at home.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Give me a kiss.”

She raised her head, and he came down and pressed their lips together. When he broke the hot kiss, his hand was on her breast, her leg in between his, and her panties were sopping wet.

“Wow,” she said.

She heard him inhale.

“Yeah. Damn, woman. Once I get in you, I’ll never want to leave.”

“I’ll probably not want you to.”

He grinned and turned her so her back was to his chest.

“Get some sleep. We have a busy couple of days to get through.”

She nodded and relaxed back against him.

Mara heard his breathing even out and closed her eyes. She’d be able to get some sleep because she felt safe. Being in his arms was a sensation she hoped she would have for a very long time.

The sun woke her the next morning. She was groggy from sleeping so hard, but her body needed it. She looked over her shoulder when he sighed.

“Good morning.”

He blinked his eyes open and smiled. “Good morning. How’d you sleep?”

“Good. Deep.”

His eyes narrowed, and he used a finger to trace under her eyes.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“For what?”

“You cried at least once, honey.”

She reached up and touched her sensitive eyes and her wet hair. “I slept through it.”

“You needed the sleep.”

She sighed. “We need to get to Melly.”

“Then let’s go. I’ll grab some coffee to take with us.”

“Okay.” She watched him walk out of the room and wanted to run her hands over his broad shoulders and muscular back.

She shook herself out of the daydream and got the clothes she had ready on the chair in his room. As she walked into the kitchen, she put her hair up in a ponytail, seeing Rafael already by the door with two cups and a clean bucket for the milk.

The day was sunny with a mild breeze. *The perfect weather day*, she thought. Being with Rafael kept her mind off of the sad things. It was her last full day on her farm, and she wanted to make the most of it.

Chapter Seventeen

Rafael got off the phone with Tony. He was headed over because they would leave early in the morning, and he and his wife, Betty, wanted them to say their goodbyes.

He watched Mara put one of the horses through its paces so she stood in the middle of the corral, and the horse went in large circles around her. She told him she wanted to get some of their energy out so the trip the next day would be easier on them.

He heard a vehicle drive in, turned to see Tony and his wife, and headed with his hand out. They shook hands.

“Is everything going all right?” Tony asked.

“She’s doing fine,” Rafael said.

“Rafael, this is my wife, Betty.”

Betty held her hand out, which he took and smiled.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Rafael said.

“You, too. I’ve heard a lot about you,” Betty said.

Rafael grinned. “Uh-oh. I hope it was good things.”

Betty smiled at her husband. “Of course.”

“How is Mara doing?” Betty asked.

“I’ll catch her thinking about Tiny and get upset, but I’ve tried to keep her busy all day. She’s in the corral right now.”

They looked over the top rail.

Tony’s mouth opened. “I can’t believe how far that horse has come.”

“What do you mean?” Rafael asked.

“When she got her hands on him, he had overgrown hooves. Look it up on the Internet to see what it looks like, but it’s painful for the animal. He was also emaciated and had scars all over from being hit.”

“How long ago was that?” Rafael asked.

“I was thinking seven or eight months ago. He’s not quite at the weight he should be, but horses take a while to gain weight if you do it the right way. When he arrived, they pulled the trailer up to the corral and opened the gate because no one could get in to lead him out. It took a long time for him to trust her, and now he loves her so much it brings tears to my eyes.”

Rafael watched her make a hand signal that stopped the horse and made it come to her. They faced one another while she talked to him, and then she smiled and hugged him. It was cool to see the horse bend its head back so it could nuzzle her and what looked like his own hug.

Betty sighed. “Denver loves that woman. Every animal that she comes in contact with falls for her.”

“It’s easy to do,” Rafael said.

Tony grinned at him. “You too, huh?”

“Yes. It hit me right between the eyes.”

The couple laughed.

“That’s what happened with my Betty and me. I knew I’d marry her the first time I saw her. It took a bit longer for her, but women can be slow sometimes.”

She gasped, making them both laugh.

Rafael chuckled. He turned to see Mara lead the horse back into the barn.

“Is everything set at home?” Tony asked.

“Yes. My grounds manager lived on a farm, so he knew exactly what would be needed with space to grow.”

“I can’t believe you got it done so quickly.”

“I started a week before I got here, so that gave him two weeks, and then he hired two building companies to get it done. It’s amazing what money can do.”

“Speaking of money, Judith called me yesterday and asked about you. I hope you don’t mind that I told her,” Tony said.

Rafael shook his head. “No, not at all. It’s exactly what I wanted. She thought I was full of shit, so I told her to ask you.”

Tony studied him. “They left.”

Rafael nodded. “Good. I warned them it wouldn’t be pretty if they stayed. I gave them twenty-four hours to get out of town. I’ll tell you why later.”

“I guessed you might have had something to do with it. I’m anxious to hear what happened to piss you off that much.”

“You’ll be pissed, too.”

Mara ran out of the barn when she saw Tony and Betty and hugged them.

“There’s Half-Pint,” Tony said.

She snorted. “I thought you stopped calling me that.”

“Nope.”

She giggled and went to stand next to Rafael. He automatically wrapped an arm around her waist. He could see the surprise on the older couple’s faces but also relief and happiness.

Tony patted his shoulder. “We’ll leave you guys to finish packing. We hope you come back and visit.”

Rafael shook his hand. “Oh, I think you’ll be surprised how much you’ll see us.”

“Why?” Tony asked.

“I’ve got some ideas I want to think about,” Rafael said. “Do you guys have any family here?”

“Well, no. Betty and I are the only ones. Unfortunately, we couldn’t have children and were the only child in each family.”

Rafael nodded and smiled.

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure I like that look in your eyes. I can see you're up to mischief."

Rafael chuckled. "I'll be calling you sometime next week."

"We'll get the house cleared of food and clean it before we shut it down," Betty said.

"Thank you. I was worried about it and knew it had to be done, but it's so much to ask," Mara said.

"Nonsense. The two of us are retired, so we have the time. Don't you worry about it," Betty said.

They shook hands and hugged Mara once more before walking to his truck. He looked down when he heard Mara sniff and saw tears rolling down her face.

He hugged her tightly against his chest. "Oh, honey, you'll see them again sooner than you think."

"I hope so. He's been a father to me since mine died, and Betty has been a better mother to me than my own," Mara said.

"I think we should consider them family. I have none left."

She hugged him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, because I have you now."

She tipped her head back to look up at him. "Yes, you do."

He bent to press his lips against hers when they heard several vehicles coming down the road. They walked out to see them slowly pull in.

"Oh, my," she said.

"I'm glad they're here. I want you to meet Porter." He watched four trailers and a camper pull in and park wherever there was space.

The men got out and started talking or stretching. One walked toward them with a hand out.

“You must be Mr. Saunders.”

“Yes.”

“I’m Ellis Jacobs. Mr. Porter hired us to transport some animals.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” He lifted Mara’s hand. “She’ll be the one to tell you about them.”

“Good. We’ll have a lot of questions. We want to get them to the farm as comfortably as possible.”

Mara nodded. “That’s good to know because every one of them was taken from horrible places in bad shape.”

The man frowned. “Damn, why do people have them if they don’t want to take care of them?”

Mara shook her head. “I’d like to know that, too. I just wish I could save every one of them.”

“If it makes you feel better, hundreds of people like you and I are saving hundreds to thousands of animals a year, so we’re not alone.”

Mara smiled. “That does make me feel better. Thank you.”

If she hadn’t been clinging to his hand, he felt he would have gotten jealous, and he’d never done that, maybe because he hadn’t cared for any other women before.

The fact the man was old enough to be her grandfather helped, too.

Chapter Eighteen

Mara stared at all the people and vehicles. She would have been overwhelmed if she hadn't had Rafael there.

"Here he comes," Rafael said.

A stocky man with brown hair with gray sprinkled through it, and friendly blue eyes stopped, and they looked at each other.

"Mara, this is Porter. He's the one who will be helping you with the farm."

Porter reached for her hand and gently shook it, but the sweet smile relaxed her. She was pretty good at reading people. This man was as kind as they came.

"It's very nice to meet you," she said.

"I have to tell you, Miss Mara..."

"Call me Mara, please."

The man looked at Rafael, got his nod, and then looked back at her. "I have to tell you that when Mr. Saunders told me about the farm and that I could help, I thought I won the lottery. I am so excited to work with you and the animals. I've hardly slept."

Mara smiled. "I think we're going to work well together."

"Me, too," Porter said.

Porter turned to Rafael so he could talk to both. "From the list of animals you gave us, we brought four trailers. It might be excessive, but we don't want them crammed together for seven hours."

Rafael glanced at Mara. "No, I want the animals comfortable, and I know Mara does, too."

She nodded.

"Would you like to show us what we're up against? Then we'll have an idea for tomorrow?" Porter said.

“Sure. Can I meet them?”

“I’ll call them over.” Porter whistled and got everyone’s attention. “Come over here, guys.”

Nine men stood in a group across from her and Rafael. Their appraisal of her made her uncomfortable, so she pressed herself tighter against Rafael’s body. When he wrapped an arm around her, it helped tremendously.

“This is Miss Mara and Mr. Saunders. If you have any questions about the animals, ask her. She’s going to take us around to check out what we’re up against tomorrow.”

Porter nodded at her. She looked up at Rafael.

“Which do you want first?”

“We’ll do the closest.”

Rafael grinned. “Then the chickens and duck it is.”

She walked them through the barn and then into the fenced-in areas. She showed them every one and gave them a little history before moving on. She saved the horses for last.

“We have four horses right now, and every one of them has come from a horrendous situation. I think we’ll only have a problem with one.”

“We brought a sedative just in case,” Porter said. “It will relax them but not put them to sleep.”

“I’ll think about that. It might be better for him to not be so stressed.”

Porter nodded. “Of course, it’s up to you, but it’s worked every time I’ve used it.”

“This beauty is Stormy, and she’s as sweet as possible. The Palomino is Luca. He’s got a bit more spirit but is still nice. The black is Denver. His situation was the worst. It took me months to get him to let me touch him. He won’t let you guys, so I’ll have to trailer him.”

“I don’t like that,” Rafael said.

Mara looked up at him. “I’ll be very careful.”

“If I might add, Mr. Saunders, the trailer has special features that protect the human. I can show you later,” Porter said.

“That will be fine.”

“This last one is Charlie. He’s a draft horse the owners about killed, making him work so much and never gave breaks. I don’t know if any of you know about the Amish community?”

A few nodded. “Well, they don’t mean to be cruel. They just don’t think of them as living, feeling animals. When one is injured, they just go get another. He’s got a personality that’s as big as him.”

Right then, Charlie lifted his head over the railing and started nipping at her hair, making her laugh. The people smiled, and a few came forward to pet him.

“If that’s it, Mara, I’ll get the men settled for the night,” Porter said.

“Where?”

“The camper we brought is plenty big for all of us and has our food and a TV.”

She looked over at it. It was very large, and she didn’t know how it would fit so many big men, but she kept her mouth shut.

“If you need anything, come to the house,” Rafael said. “We’re going to bed. She’s had a long day.”

She waved. “It was nice to meet you all.”

“See you in the morning, Miss Mara,” a few said.

They got to the back door, and she stopped.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s getting dark, and we didn’t get a chance to go see Tiny,” she said.

Rafael rubbed her shoulders. “I know. We’ll get up before the sun and be ready to go.”

“We should milk Melly first.”

He nodded. “Then that’s what we’ll do. There are lights in the barns.”

“Okay.” She walked in, through the kitchen, and up the stairs, aware of him stepping behind her. If she wasn’t so tired and they didn’t have a lot to do tomorrow, she’d try to get him to kiss her more.

“Why don’t you jump into the shower, and I’ll bring your gown in? We’ll get you tucked into bed, and then I’ll take mine.”

“All right.”

She was dragging by the time she finished her shower, dried her hair, and brushed her teeth. She crawled into bed and was out a second later. She felt Rafael arrange her against him, and then he kissed the back of her head. This feeling of being cherished and cared for was something she’d never experienced before, but she could get used to it very easily.

Chapter Nineteen

The morning was exhausting, but every animal was in the trailers. It looked like chaos, but these people knew what they were doing.

Rafael and Mara were going to wait until everyone was gone before going down to Tiny's grave because by the time they had Melly milked, several men were outside roaming around, and she wanted some privacy. He waved to the last trailer before looking around for Mara. He found her in one of the barns.

"Honey, nothing is going to happen to this place. It will always be yours. Tony will find a caretaker to live here to watch over the place."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes. We thought you'd like that."

"I do. Very much. I was worried, but now I'm relieved."

"Have you said your goodbyes inside the house and in the barns?"

She looked around and nodded.

"Then let's get the bone to Tiny."

"I'd like that."

She picked up the wrapped bone they laid on the back step and made their way to the grave.

"Tell me if you want more privacy," he said.

She looked at him. "You can stay there."

"Then I will. I'll be waiting for you."

She sighed, nodded, and walked to the pile of dirt. He watched her dig a hole with her hands and bury the bone with the paper still around it for Tiny. It broke his heart to hear her crying and saying goodbye. The fact that there was nothing he could do about it made him crazy.

She wiped her hands on her jeans as she stood over the grave for several minutes before turning back to him. He opened his arms, and she raced into them, sobbing. He just held her and talked about how everything would be all right, and that Tiny was watching over her. She nodded and wiped her eyes with her shirt.

He wrapped an arm around her. “Are you ready, honey?”

She balked.

“Remember, you can come back here whenever you want.” He watched her relax.

She exhaled. “I won’t forget. Let’s go.”

He led her to the truck and lifted her in. He took his last look around and was amazed at the fact he’d miss the place, too.

He got to the end of the driveway and reached for her hand. “Now, we’re going home, and I know you’ll be happy there.”

“Anywhere you are, I’ll be happy.”

He kissed her knuckles. “I’m going to take very good care of you.”

She rested the side of her head on the seat. “I know. You’ve been so good to me and helped me more than you know.”

“Well, I learned more here than I did my first year in college, so we’re even.”

It felt good to hear her laugh.

They kept up the conversation as they pulled into the small airport road.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“We’re going to fly home.”

“I know, but this isn’t the main airport.”

“We don’t need one. Trust me.”

She nodded and relaxed back in her seat.

They pulled up to the small building and parked. His pilot came out smiling.

“Good morning, Mr. Saunders.”

“Hello, Marcus. I want you to meet Mara. Honey, this guy is going to fly us home.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, holding her hand out.

“You, too. Are you ready to go?” Marcus asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you have any luggage?”

“No, we had Porter take it with them.”

“All right then, the things you requested are on the table in front of your chair. We can go whenever you’re ready. I’ll be waiting by the plane.”

Marcus walked off before he looked down at Mara. She clutched his hand so tight he thought he’d have marks on his hands.

“What’s bothering you, honey?”

“I’ve never flown.”

“Don’t worry. Marcus is the best. He’ll get us home safe.”

They got to the steps where Marcus was waiting.

She took a step up. “You have a nice plane, Marcus.”

“Oh...”

Rafael shook his head. He’d have to give her time to get used to his lifestyle. He was going to take his time. She’d find out it was his plane eventually.

He got them situated and her strapped in while Marcus closed the plane’s hatch and then went past the curtain into the cockpit.

She jumped when Marcus came over the intercom stating the wind direction and the time it would take to get

them home. She gasped when the engine started. She reached for his hand and gripped it tightly when it started moving.

He leaned over. "I'll say it as many times as I have to. Trust me, baby."

She looked at him, relaxed, and nodded.

Jesus, what that did to him when she put her control in his hands.

The flight was uneventful, and Mara even looked out the window most of the time. When they landed on his private airstrip, he was thrilled to be home but also frightened because he didn't know how she would react.

He wanted it to be an easy transition for her, but he feared it might take a while. Not that he was giving her up.

Chapter Twenty

Mara breathed a sigh of relief when the plane landed and came to a stop. Marcus came out from the front of the plane, opened the hatch, and walked down the steps. Rafael had worked on his computer the whole time, but it had been less than a two-hour flight.

Rafael went down the steps and reached up for her hand to help her down. She looked around. It was the same as the other airport but fancier. A dark car was in front of them with a man standing by an open door.

She turned to the pilot. "Thank you for a nice flight. It was my very first one."

Marcus smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it." He looked at Rafael. "I'll grab your things, sir."

"Thank you, Marcus."

Rafael took her hand and walked her over to the man by the car.

"Jorge, this is Mara. She will be living with me. Honey, I want you to meet Jorge. If you want to go anywhere, he'll drive you."

"What if he's busy?" she asked.

Jorge cleared his throat.

"He works for us, and his job is to drive."

She looked at him. "Do you like driving?"

Jorge looked surprised and then at Rafael and got his nod. "I do very much. They give me these cool cars to drive."

She grinned. "I don't like to drive."

"Well, you won't have to."

"I can if you're busy, though."

Jorge smiled. "I can guarantee I will not be too busy for you."

“Okay.”

Rafael got her in the car, and then he followed. When the door closed, it was dark inside, with only a few soft lights on the floor. She looked around in amazement. She’d been on a plane and now in a car that she guessed only movie stars had.

Rafael pulled her back into his arms. “How are you holding up?”

“It’s like I’m a movie star or in a dream.”

He chuckled. “Maybe both.”

She laughed and looked over her shoulder at him. “It’s pretty cool the owners let you ride in them.”

“Honey, I’m going to tell you something, and I don’t want you to freak out.”

She stiffened. That didn’t sound good. “Okay.”

“I own both the plane and the car.”

She looked at him. “Like by yourself?”

“Well, yes.”

She didn’t know how she felt. Before, he’d made references about money, but not enough to own his own plane.

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. Can we talk about it later? I won’t be able to understand right now. There’s too much going on,” she said. Mara was feeling overwhelmed at the moment.

He kissed her temple. “Just remember, no matter what, I want you here with me more than anything, and we’ll work through any problems.”

That made her feel better. “Okay.”

“Relax. We’re just about home.” He pulled her back against him.

They drove down a street with houses bigger than the White House, she guessed. Everything about them was clean and tidy. The people who owned them had to be movie stars,

and she wanted to see who they were. They slowed down some more and went through huge metal gates and up a long driveway.

“Jorge, take us to the farm, please.”

They came over a hill, and she saw a bigger house than the others down the road.

“Is that a country club?” she asked.

Rafael sounded like he was choking. “Not exactly. It’s a house.”

They drove down a small road toward the back of the place. She relaxed. Thank God she didn’t have to live there. They went past a grove of trees, and then the space opened up, and her breath caught.

“Oh, my.” There was a brand new huge red barn. Several corrals were attached to it with crisp white railings, and she saw where the horses would be stabled. There were other pens around for the other animals. There were pastures of thick, lush grass for miles and fencing everywhere she looked.

They came to a stop, and the door opened. Rafael got out first and reached in for her. Her head swiveled right and left, trying to take it all in.

“Jorge, can you believe this?” she asked.

“Porter did a fine job. He thought of everything.”

“I can’t wait.” She looked up at Rafael. “Can we go look?”

“Yes, but then I want us to go to the house, eat lunch, and maybe rest for a bit.”

“But I have to be here when the animals get here.”

“I know, honey. Porter will call when they are thirty minutes away. It’s going to be at least five hours.”

“Oh.”

Chapter Twenty-One

They spent an hour at the farm before Rafael pulled her away.

They got back into the car and drove back the way they came. Her stomach dropped when they pulled in front of the massive house and stopped.

“This is your house?” she asked, praying he would tell her no.

“Yes, baby. I know it’s a lot to take in, but you are not alone. Remember that,” Rafael said and then helped her out of the car when Jorge opened the door.

Rafael kept a strong hold of her hand as they walked up the rounded stone steps to a huge ornate wooden door. It opened before they got to it. The older man stood just inside and bowed to Rafael.

“It’s good to have you home, sir.”

“It’s good to be home.” Rafael turned to her and wrapped an arm around her waist. “Landry, I’d like you to meet Mara.” He looked down at her. “Mara, this is Landry. He will be in charge of you when I’m at work.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, holding her hand out. The man hesitated for a moment and then shook hers. She wanted to say she didn’t need a babysitter, but this was all so new and overwhelming that she’d need to make as many friends as possible.

“It’s nice to meet you, young lady. I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

“I’ll try my very best to be helpful,” she said.

“I think it will be fine. Sir, lunch is ready when you are,” Landry said.

Rafael nodded and checked his watch. “Good. We’ll eat and lay down for a bit before the animals arrive.”

“Call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Landry.”

Rafael moved her through a long hallway with rooms off to the sides, but she couldn't determine what they were. They came to a very large room with a table that was longer than her whole house and what looked like twenty chairs.

“We'll eat most of our meals in this room.”

“Why can't we eat in a smaller one?” she asked.

He smiled gently down at her. “This *is* the small one.”

Mara swallowed. “Oh.” Holy hell.

He sat her down at one end of the table. He was at the head, and she was to the right of him. “This will be your chair, baby.”

She nodded and then jumped when a door at the other end of the table opened, and four maids walked in carrying plates and bowls. They put a bowl and a plate in front of each, curtsied, and walked out without talking. She looked at Rafael, and he was already eating his soup.

He pointed to her bowl. “Eat, baby. You'll like it. Ms. Barley is an excellent cook.”

She nodded and picked up the spoon on the same plate as the bowl. She dipped it in and took a cautious sip. It was warm, and the taste burst into her mouth.

“Mmm, this is good.”

Rafael smiled at her. “I'm glad you like it.”

They ate the soup and then started on a small noodle salad.

She moved a few things around on the plate. “What's this?”

He looked down at what she was poking at and grinned. “That's lobster.”

She picked a piece up. “Oh. I've never had it.”

“You'll like it unless you hate seafood.”

“I think I like about anything.” She took a bite and smiled. “I like this.”

He chuckled. “Good.”

Another plate was brought out, and their dishes were taken. This was some kind of meat and tiny potatoes. She ate half before the girls returned, taking the plate from her.

“Thank you.”

They looked shocked and wondered at it.

“Thank you, girls,” Rafael said.

The girls walked away hurriedly.

“Why can’t they talk?” she asked him.

He grinned. “They can talk. It’s just I like it quiet when I’m eating. I got that from my parents.”

“So, I shouldn’t talk either?”

He placed his hand on hers. “Baby, there is nothing you can’t do. I just need to know you’re safe at all times.”

She nodded and eyed what looked like a fancy tiny cupcake. She reached for it but saw Rafael pick up another fork and eat with it. Her eyes almost rolled back at the rich chocolate taste.

When they finished, he helped her to stand. “Let me show you our suite.”

She was almost out of breath when they finally came to double doors. He opened one and led her through. It looked like a small family room and office on the other side of the room. It was cozier but still the size of one of her barns.

“We’ll spend our time at home here, mostly.”

She nodded.

“Let me show you our bedroom.”

He opened another door, and the huge bed was the first thing she saw. The color scheme was soothing with its golds and blues. This room also had a seating arrangement but just two chairs and a table.

“Come this way,” he said.

She walked over to him, and he opened another door. Good Lord, how many doors were in the place?

She gasped. The floor and countertop were marble with a small gold ribbon of color in it. It tied in with the color scheme in the bedroom. The counter was seven feet long and had two sinks. The bathtub was the size of a baby pool and had a lot of jets in it. The shower was also large. Nothing was small here. Eight people could fit very well in it and still have room.

He opened another door. “This is where the toilet is.”

Her mouth almost dropped open. They had a room just for the toilet. She almost groaned when he showed her yet another door.

“This is our closet.”

Her mouth did drop open. There were fifty drawers and then several feet of places to hang clothes. There was also a big low cabinet that had a lot of drawers. On the end of that were two cushioned chaises that she could have slept on very easily. There were a hundred business suits in one area.

“How do you decide what to wear?”

He grinned. “I usually just grab one. Some are dressier than others, so that helps me decide. My casual pants are next to them.”

She almost laughed. Casual to him was expensive pants and cashmere shirts.

Then his shirts were on a pole above them. There was still over half of the closet for her. She grinned.

“What?” he asked.

“My clothes will fit on one pole.”

“Remember, I want to buy you other clothes.”

“Why?”

“What if we go to a nice restaurant? Would you feel comfortable in your jeans?”

“No. You’re right. Just don’t spend a lot, please.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll try my very best. Now let’s take a little nap.”

She nodded. The day had been exhausting, and it wasn’t over yet.

They walked back into the bedroom, where he lifted her onto the mattress and pulled her shoes and socks off. He laid her down and pulled her jeans off. He left her shirt and panties on, thankfully.

“Scoot up,” he said and took off his own clothes except for his jeans.

She lay down with him at her back. The doubts she had were starting to bombard her.

“Rafael?”

“What, baby?”

“I don’t belong here.”

He moved her to her back so he could look down at her.

“Sweetheart, I know it’s got to be overwhelming for you. I promise everything will settle down. Everyone in this house is here to help you.”

“I’m just so far out of my element.”

“Do you know that when I was with you on the farm, I felt more in those six days than I had in my whole life? You gave me so many new life experiences that I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere else, and I swear it changed me for the better. I want to give that to you. You make me happier than anything or anyone ever could, so please don’t take that away from me. I’ve got things to learn, but knowing you, I’m certain you’ll get me in line quickly.”

She nodded and then sighed when he started to kiss her. It didn’t last long before he lifted his head and then turned

her back on her side.

Mara thought she was too wound up to rest, but she was asleep in a matter of seconds.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Hey, baby. They’ll be here in about thirty minutes, so we better get down to the farm.”

She rolled and started up at him. “How long have I been asleep?”

He chuckled. “You took a two-hour nap.”

“Did you?”

“No. After you fell asleep, I did some work in our family room.”

“Oh.”

“Why don’t you splash some water on your face?”

She nodded. “I will.” He let her roll off the bed, put her socks and shoes on, and entered the bathroom. She didn’t look around because her stomach tightened in agitation.

He took her hand and led her back downstairs and out a door.

“I’ll have the Ranger parked here if you need it. But first, I’d like to see how you do. I had Jorge put it in the lowest gear so you can’t go faster than fifteen miles an hour.”

He put her in what looked like a miniature car but without windows except for the windshield.

“I can drive. I just don’t like to. I had to learn on the farm because it was just me.”

“Now you have Jorge.”

She nodded.

He showed her how to get it started. It made her stomach flip. He helped her put it in reverse, then drove and took her down the path she’d use. It was stop-and-go a few times, but then she got the hang of it.

They parked by the barn. They both got the stalls ready with fresh water and hay. They had just finished when they

heard all the vehicles driving down the road. For the next couple of hours, everyone helped get the animals exercised, the cow milked and then bedded down for the night.

Mara waved as each truck and trailer drove out. Rafael was talking to Porter.

“Bye, Mara. I’ll see you in the morning,” Porter said.

“Bye, thank you.”

She and Rafael walked to the Ranger and drove back up to the house. By then, they were ready for dinner. They didn’t have the energy to shower before, so they sat in their dusty clothes and had the meal. After, they tracked up the stairs to their bedroom.

“Let me get the shower started for you, baby. Get out of those clothes.”

Mara was too tired to do anything but what he said. She stripped, stepped under the water, and groaned. She was startled when she felt a hot male body behind her.

“Let’s get you washed. You look about ready to drop.”

He held her as he washed and conditioned her hair and then her body. When she turned around, her face reddened, making him chuckle.

“You better get used to my body, baby.” He stepped back. “Now you wash me.”

Even though she was embarrassed the whole time, she enjoyed touching him. She liked how his breath caught when her soapy hand stroked his hard cock.

“Do you like this, Daddy?”

“Jesus, woman. Are you trying to kill me?”

She giggled.

“Let’s get out and dry off.”

He put a towel around his waist and helped her dry her hair. “Brush your teeth and get into bed.”

“Where is my nightgown?”

He cupped her face. “You will never wear a gown or anything else to bed.”

“Will you be naked?” she asked.

“Yes. Is that going to be a problem?”

“I ... no.” She shook her head.

“All right. I’ll be right in.”

She had just settled under the sheets when he walked out, still with the towel around him. He turned off the light, threw the towel aside, and slipped in beside her.

He cupped her face. “As much as I want to fuck you, we’re both too tired. But I will wake you up tomorrow, and we will finally take the step that makes you mine.”

Before she could say anything, he kissed her with blatant hunger, leaving her breathless.

“Good night, baby.”

“Good night, Daddy.”

Mara felt something tickle her tummy and blinked open her eyes to see Rafael smiling down at her and running his fingertips around her belly button.

“There she is,” he said.

“Hi.”

He grinned. “Hi.”

Her breath stalled in her throat when his touching moved up and around each nipple. Her tits instantly hardened, and her heart rate rose.

She opened her mouth to say something, but his own covered hers, kissing her with undisguised passion. Her arms circled his neck, and she let her thoughts fade. While his mouth was on hers, his hand slid over her body, leaving goosebumps.

She froze when his fingers slid in between her cunt lips and circled her clit. Bits of light burst under her eyelids.

“Let’s see how tight this cunt is?” he said.

She felt pressure as he pushed something into her.
“What is that?”

He chuckled. “One of my fingers.”

She thought back to the shower they had and how big his cock was.

“You won’t fit.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “Oh, yes, I will, and you’ll love every bit of it. The first time I take your cherry will pinch, but it goes away quickly.”

She’d read about it before and was not looking forward to it.

He pumped one finger into her several times before adding one and then a third.

The stretching sensation became almost painful. “Daddy,” she exclaimed as she tried to pull him closer to her.

“I’m right here, baby. Just relax and enjoy.”

She continued to jerk around as something inside her grew exponentially and kept growing until she thought she’d burst. Finally, he was on top of her, and she begged him to help her. She felt the pressure again, but this time it went deeper. She felt his cock bump against something and then a searing pain.

She had no idea she cried out or had tears falling.

“Shhh, it’s okay, baby. All the pain is gone. There will never be any pain again.”

He stayed still, letting her recover from the shock from the pain, and continued kissing the tears from her face.

“I’m going to move. Tell me if you feel any pain,” he said.

She nodded and then braced herself. She was shocked and pleased that she felt her desire grow again.

“Can you go faster, Daddy?”

“Yes, baby. I’m getting close, so hold onto me.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck, and her legs crossed on his lower back. His thrusts were gaining speed and velocity, and she wanted to scream to go harder but then stopped because it was building that pressure inside her.

He hit something inside her, throwing her into a maze of sensations and making her scream.

“That’s it. Keep coming.”

Finally, the claws of the orgasm released her. She vaguely heard his groan, and then he pumped into her a few more times and then stalled on top of her, fortunately keeping most of his weight off so she could breathe. He tipped them to the side with his cock still embedded in her. A sigh escaped as she cuddled Rafael again.

“I’m yours now, Daddy. Right?”

“You were mine the first time I saw you, but this cemented our commitment and love.”

Her heart felt like it would burst out of her chest, and her smile couldn’t get any bigger.

“I love you, Daddy.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I love you, too.”

It was a memory she’d have for the rest of her life, and she couldn’t wait until they made love again and he told her he loved her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mara walked down the hallway toward Rafael's office but stopped when she heard him talking. She didn't want to interrupt him and turned to go ... until she heard her name.

"Are you taking your new woman?"

It was a woman's voice she'd never heard before.

"No."

"Why?"

"She'd be uncomfortable," Rafael said.

"There are several people that would like to meet her."

She heard her Daddy sigh. "I know. I want her settled in before I throw more on her. Can you come with me?" Rafael asked.

"Sure. I'll meet you there."

"Good."

Mara heard high heels clicking and ducked into the first open room. When she saw the lady, her stomach tightened. She didn't have to see the front of this woman to know she was beautiful, and her dress was high-class and sexy. Her heels were probably four inches, and Mara knew she'd break her head if she tried to walk in them.

She went over everything that was said and could take it several ways. He didn't want to pressure her or put her in a situation where she was uncomfortable. The one she didn't want to think about was he was embarrassed by her. She had thought that a few times already because he'd never taken her off the property, and she'd been there close to two months.

She knew he was catching up with work because he was gone for a week when he visited her farm. That kept playing in her head because she wanted to grab anything positive.

Mara raced up the back stairs to her room, grabbed her phone, and sat on the mattress. She dialed the number Landry had given her when she asked, and a moment later, Larkin answered.

“Hi.”

Larkin gasped. “Hi. When do we get to see you?” Larkin asked.

“I’d like to see you whenever you can.”

“Then I’ll ask my Daddy about a date. Now, tell me why you sound sad?”

“I’m not really sad. I heard my Daddy say he didn’t want to take me to this thing tomorrow night...”

“I know what he’s talking about. It’s a meet-and-greet. Businesspeople in the area come to meet new clients.”

“Will you be there?”

“Yes,” Larkin said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Can you and whoever is available tomorrow come and show me how to dress classy and do makeup and hair?”

“Sure. I’ll call a few girls. They can bring some outfits to see if any look good. “

Mara relaxed. “That would be great.”

“What are you planning on doing?”

“I want to dress like the other women so he’s not embarrassed by me.”

Larkin hissed. “Why would you think that?”

“I’ve been here for over seven weeks, Larkin, and I haven’t been off the property.”

“Oh, wow. I hadn’t realized it. The girls have called for a few playdates and were always told you were busy.”

Mara felt her heart break. “You’re kidding me?”

“No. I’m not.”

“I have never been told you guys called. I kept asking to talk to you. I finally got your number from Landry, his butler.” Mara felt tears slide down her face. “God, what do I do? The last thing I want to do is embarrass him.”

“I say we go with your plan. Is your Daddy going to let us come to your house tomorrow?”

“He’ll be gone all day and is supposed to be in meetings, so I won’t see him at all because he said I’d probably be asleep when he gets home,” Mara said.

“Good. We’ll be there late morning.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“We’ll get this figured out. I hate hearing you so sad,” Larkin said.

“I just sometimes think I made the biggest mistake coming here, but now I feel stuck because my animals are here.”

“We’ll get the girls together and talk about everything. Don’t get upset now, not until we know the truth.”

Mara sniffed and wiped her eyes. “I’m so glad I have you guys.”

“You’ll always have us. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Mara sat there and let the tears come until she heard footsteps approaching the bedroom. She raced into the back of the closet and hid behind some hanging clothes.

“Mara, honey, are you in here?” Rafael called out.

She pressed her hands to her mouth. The last thing she wanted to do was show him she was sad. He’d ask too many questions, and she wouldn’t be able to hide anything from him.

He cursed a few times and made a call. “Landry, are you sure she’s not down there?”

“Yes, sir. I thought she went up to your room.”

“Keep looking. I have an important meeting I need to go to. Tell her I’ll see her at dinner.”

“I will do that.”

“All right, thank you,” Rafael said.

She heard him sigh, and then his footsteps receded. For several minutes she let herself cry to release the tension in her stomach.

When she finished, she washed her face with cold water and then snuck out one of the back doors. She slowly walked through the grove of trees, taking some time to let the redness and puffiness go from her face. She hid behind the last tree and took several deep breaths before walking into one of the barns. She got busy, mucking out one of the stalls.

“There you are,” Porter said. “Your Daddy was looking for you. He called down here about thirty minutes ago.”

“Why?” she asked.

“He wanted to see you before he left for a meeting.”

She smiled the best she could. “I’ll see him in a few hours.”

Porter stared at her. “What’s wrong? I can tell you’re upset about something.”

“I can’t really talk about it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It must be between you and Mr. Saunders.”

“Yes. We’ll talk tonight.”

“Make sure you do. You don’t want this to fester longer than it needs to.”

She nodded and watched Porter walk off. She spent the next few hours brushing animals and cleaning because there was always something to be done.

Porter stopped her. “Hey, Mara, you better get up to the big house and shower. Dinnertime is in forty-five minutes.”

“Oh, thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

“Night, Porter.”

Mara rushed through the kitchen.

“Slow down, child, before you crash!” yelled Ms. Bailey.

“I’m sorry, Ms. B.”

She slowed down until she got to the other hallway and ran up the stairs. She was showered and dressed in one of Rafael’s favorites. She brushed her hair until it lay in big locks down her back and put in a ribbon that matched the dress.

Mara was headed down the steps when Landry stopped her.

“Miss Mara, your Daddy called and said the meeting was going longer than expected, so go ahead and eat without him.”

“Oh.” She felt deflated, and tears stung her eyes.

“He’ll be home soon, dear. Don’t be sad.”

She nodded.

“Laundry, may I ask you a question and get a true answer?”

The butler walked to her and clasped his hands behind his back. “I can with one hundred percent certainty tell you I will never lie to you.”

“Good. Do you think I make Daddy happy?”

“Oh, dear, I’ve never seen him this happy, and I’ve been in the family since he was a child. Don’t ever think that you’re not loved.”

“Is there anything else I can do to improve myself, like etiquette classes, book groups, things like that?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment and then shook his head. “I’m trying to think of anything he would change about you, and there isn’t one.”

She smiled and ran and put her arms around him. “Thank you for being my friend.”

The man stiffened because he wasn't used to hugs or touching. She felt him pat her back.

“It's an honor to be your friend,” Landry said. “Now, you better go get your dinner before Ms. B starts yelling.”

Mara giggled. “Okay. Thank you.” She walked into the dining room and saw the placemat on her chair while the rest of the table was bare. She didn't want to eat in there without Rafael. She walked into the kitchen and stood off to the side out of the way.

“What do you need, child?” Ms. B asked.

“Can I sit somewhere else besides the dining room? It makes me feel lonely.”

Ms. B came to her and wrapped an arm around her waist. “You can sit wherever you want, but if you want company, you can sit at the island, watch us, and eat.”

Mara laughed the whole time she was in the kitchen. She liked watching the hustle and bustle of all the maids and the cook.

She got ready and went to bed alone. It was past midnight when she felt Rafael slide in behind her and wrap his arm around her. She felt him kiss the back of her head, and he was asleep a moment later.

Why did she still feel lonely with him in bed with her? She hoped she was doing the right thing tomorrow. It could make or break her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mara was pacing in front of the front door, waiting impatiently for her friends. She'd gone back and forth about her decision to go to the office party Rafael would be at.

The doorbell rang, and since she was closer, she got to it before Landry did. Larkin was the first one through, followed by Brylee and Aleena. They all had their arms full of packages.

"Oh, dear," Landry said when he got to the door. "What is all of this, Miss Mara?"

"My friends came over to play dress-up. That's okay, isn't it?" Mara said.

"Well, I suppose. Does your Daddy know?" Landry asked.

"He likes it when I spend time with my friends."

"That is true. Go on up to your room. Is there anything I can get for you?"

The girls shook their heads.

"All right. Call down if you think of anything."

The four raced up the stairs and down the hall to her bedroom. They threw everything on the bed and started unpacking.

"We brought several different dresses," Larkin said.

"I'm doing the right thing, aren't I, you guys?" Mara asked.

"I think so," Brylee said. "Sometimes our daddies need to be shaken up. It keeps them on their toes."

Mara giggled. "All right. Let's try on some of these. They're all beautiful." There were all different colors and lengths. It took an hour to try on all the dresses and choose the perfect one.

She chose a shimmery white dress that was a few inches above her knees. It was a bit daring, and it would take some getting used to because she'd never worn a fancy dress before.

"These heels would go with it." Aleena got on her knees and helped her get the white shoes on. They were only a few inches, but she still needed to get used to them.

"I'll practice today," Mara said.

"I had to do that, too," Brylee giggled.

"Now for your hair," Aleena said, pulling her into the bathroom. "I'm going to keep it simple but elegant."

"How are you going to get there without your Daddy knowing?" Larkin asked.

Mara looked down. "Oh, I'm not sure."

"Brylee and I are going together and will meet our daddies there."

Mara tried not to let that bother her. Why were they allowed and accepted, but not her? They came from not-great backgrounds. But they were all prettier than her, so that could be why. Maybe with the right makeup and hair, she'd be as pretty, too.

"Let me check on something," Larkin said and got on the phone.

Mara heard her talking but not the words.

"Stand still," Aleena said.

Mara looked back at her reflection and watched Aleena do her hair.

"Okay, Daddy said you should ride with us. You'll just come home with us, get dressed, and my driver will get us to the building."

"What should I say to my Daddy?" Mara asked.

"My Daddy's going to ask if we can play together. He's not telling him where."

“He’s going to help us?” Mara asked.

“Yes. He hasn’t been pleased with the way Rafael is acting.”

“So, it’s not just me?”

Brylee hugged her. “No. The girls keep asking when you can come to tour the farm, and the men aren’t happy because Rafael keeps saying no.”

Larkin’s phone rang. The three other girls watched her. Mara relaxed when she saw the smile on Larkin’s face when she hung up the phone.

“My Daddy said he liked the idea of you coming with us tonight and that you should just come home with us. He’s going to call Landry for us.”

Mara relaxed. “When can we go?”

“Now. Hicks is outside. That way, we won’t have to worry about wrinkles or getting dirty when we get dressed.”

“Pack whatever you need. I’ll do your hair at Larkin’s,” Aleena said. “We’ve got the rest.”

The girls gathered everything and headed down the stairs. Mara stiffened when she saw Landry waiting by the front door. She was afraid he’d stop her.

Landry bowed. “Have a good time tonight, Miss Mara,” he said.

Mara smiled and hugged him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Stay with the girls.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Very good.” Landry looked at her friends. “It was nice to see you all, young ladies.”

“You, too,” they all chimed.

The girls piled into the limo.

Mara watched the different houses pass by. She looked at the girls. “How did you guys get used to living this way?”

Larkin laughed. "I had a hard time for a while."

"I did, too," Brylee said.

"But getting to know the people that were taking care of me helped," Larkin said. "I wouldn't say I'm used to it now, but I'd do anything to be with Darian."

"I feel like that. I just wish Rafael would help me adapt more. He's always gone. He comes home for dinner but then goes into his office right after. Most time, I'm asleep when he comes to bed, and he's gone before I get up."

She was glad when the girls scowled.

"Hopefully, tonight will shake him up, and things will change," Aleena said.

"I hope so, too."

Mara's eyes widened when they pulled into a driveway and up to a house as big as Rafael's.

"It looks like a castle," Mara said.

The girls laughed. "That's what we all said."

Hicks opened the back door of the vehicle.

"We'll be leaving here at six forty-five," he said. "Try not to be too late."

Larkin laughed. "I'll try hard this time."

The driver sighed. "I'm sure you'll try very hard."

Mara had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at the sarcastic tone.

Mara's eyes scanned the area as she followed the girls up the stairs.

"Elder, we're going to try to leave by six forty-five," Larkin said when the butler closed the door behind them.

"I'm sure you will *try*," he said.

Brylee and Aleena giggled.

Larkin scowled at them and then turned back to Hicks. "Do you think it would be okay if we had a tray of goodies

brought up? We'll be starving by the time the buffet is open tonight."

"I'm sure Ella would be able to send something up. I'll ask her."

Larkin hugged Hicks. "Thank you. We're going to our bedroom and not the playroom."

"Good to know."

"Wow, this is beautiful, Larkin," Mara said as they entered the bedroom. The room was as big as a small apartment, much like her and Rafael's. It had a seating arrangement with an entertainment table and bar off to one side. It might have been bigger than her and Rafael's, and she greatly liked the blue tones. It made her feel more relaxed than the black and white did in Rafael's.

"Thank you. We spend a lot of time here because it's private."

She and Rafael hadn't spent any time in the room besides sleeping because he was always working. It made her feel even worse thinking about it.

"Come on. We've got a few hours," Larkin said.

The next few hours were enjoyable for Mara, and she laughed more than she had in a long time. She wished she could be that happy with Rafael.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rafael was in his office when his secretary interrupted him.

“Sir, there’s a Mr. Welder on the phone for you.”

It took him a second to remember. “Put him through.”

“Hello, Tony.”

“Hello.”

Just the tone of that word told him something was very wrong.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve called my girl several times since she’s been there, and every time, she sounds sadder than the time before. When I ask how you’re doing, she says she doesn’t know because she hardly ever sees you. Can you tell me what the hell is going on? I told you she would need attention, especially at the beginning. I’ve been sick thinking I ruined that sweet girl’s life when I trusted you.”

Rafael pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been busy catching up since we got home.”

“Rafael, don’t bullshit this old man. She’s been there for close to eight weeks.”

That surprised Rafael. He hadn’t thought it had been that long. “Things will calm down after a while.”

“Jesus, man, do you hear yourself? You wanted this woman so much, and now she’s an afterthought.”

“That’s not true.”

“The hell it isn’t. Is this one of those deals where she was a challenge, but now that you have her, you’ve grown bored?”

“Goddammit, Tony. That is so much bullshit. I love this woman.”

Tony snorted. “That’s a funny way of showing it. I asked her if she wanted to come back home, and do you know what she said?”

Fuck, the thought of losing her made him sick. “No.”

“She said it looked like that might happen.”

Rafael straightened. “She said what?”

“You’re not making her happy, man. And the sad thing is you don’t even know it.”

Tony was right. Everyone had said one thing or another about her not being happy. Darian asked if he had spent time with her, and he told him the truth. Darian warned him that littles are more emotional than the average woman and need a lot of time, or they don’t feel loved. Other friends with littles had made the same kind of comments. Even his butler, Landry, had said how sad she was, and he hadn’t done a damn thing to fix the problem.

“I’m not sure what to tell you,” Rafael said.

Tony sighed. “This is one mistake I will regret for the rest of my life.”

“What?”

“Letting you near her.”

“Wha...” He heard Tony hang up and sat there with a sick feeling in his gut.

There was no question he loved her. It was *how much* that scared him. She was the only thing in the world that would devastate him if he lost her, and it seemed he’d been losing her and not seen it.

Fuck, how did he fix this?

“Are you ready?”

He looked to see Tabitha, an old friend he usually took to these things. He wouldn’t have tonight, but there would be some people he wanted to do business with, and they were big on families. The thought of taking Mara popped into his head,

but he had no idea how she would handle something like this, and it was too important to ruin it.

“Yes. Let me get my jacket.”

The two walked out of the building and into Rafael’s limo.

“Thank you, Jorge.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

They got comfortable in the back.

“Since when do you thank the help?” Tabitha asked.

Rafael was shocked that she said that, but because of Mara, he’d become more human. Tabitha had grown up in a family much like his but would always be the self-righteous snob. Since they hadn’t had a personal relationship for years, he didn’t have to see her often and so didn’t have to deal with her.

Tabitha cuddled up beside him and wrapped her arms around his.

“How about after the party, we head back to my place? It’s been a long time.”

He looked down at her. “Tabitha, you know I’m in a committed relationship.”

She rolled her eyes. “For one thing, that has never stopped people in our circle from having fun on the side, and another, your little woman is an ignorant country bumkin. She’ll never know.”

The thought made him sick. “That will never happen. I love Mara.”

Tabitha snorted. “I don’t know why. If you love her so much, why am I here instead of her? Maybe she’s just a convenient fuck. She’s always there like a quiet little mouse and does whatever you want?”

He’d never wanted to strangle her this much in his whole life. “I want you to shut the fuck up.”

She gasped.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really? I’m here, and she isn’t. That says it all.”

Before he opened his mouth, the door opened. He hadn’t known they had stopped. She climbed out, and he followed. He saw the way Jorge wouldn’t look him in the eyes.

“Thank you, Jorge.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Still, there was no eye contact, and the driver’s tone was as cold as possible. Why did he care that the driver disapproved of what he was doing? He paid his fucking wage.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He followed Tabitha into the building and up the elevator. When they stepped out, the huge room across the hallway looked and sounded like it was already packed.

“I need a drink, darling. Can you get me some champagne? And it better be good.”

He nodded and looked around. Off to the left were some of his friends, Darian, Gage, and Kaleb. If looking could freeze a heart, they would have done it.

“What are you doing by the door?” he asked.

“We’re waiting for our women,” Darian said. “I see you decided to bring your mistress.”

“She’s not my fucking mistress. She just knows how to talk with these people.”

“Oh, and Mara wouldn’t?” Kaleb asked.

“No. She’s never been in situations like this.”

“Either had my little, but I would have never left Larkin home while I brought another woman,” Darian said.

Rafael got frustrated. “You’re telling me that your littles enjoy these things?”

“Yes, they enjoy anything that lets them be with us,” Gage said. “They stay off to the side together and have a blast. They love watching people. They make up stories about them, and some of them are hilarious.”

Jesus, could he feel any lower?

The man he’d come to see just walked in. Fuck, he’d try to get out of there early, so he could be home.

“I need to talk to Trowbridge.”

“That’s fine,” Darian said. “Have a nice evening.”

Rafael sighed.

“One last thing. I regret that you ever met Mara and that I encouraged you to have her. I’ve got a dozen men that would kill for her, and now there’s no chance, and do you know why?” Darian asked.

“No.”

“Because once a little falls in love, there will be no other man she could feel that way with.”

“I love her, too.”

Rafael gritted his teeth when all three men laughed.

“If that’s love in your book, you’re fucked,” Gage said.

Rafael growled. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Darian shrugged. “I don’t think I want to hear any more about this. Get used to the idea of losing her, and once you have, it’s next to impossible to fix their broken hearts.”

Rafael felt like his jaws would snap at the anger that rolled through him. It wasn’t the time to get into this with them.

Tabitha came up and wrapped her arms around his. “Rafael, Trowbridge is asking about you.”

The distaste in the other men’s eyes made him feel like a snake.

“Hello, gentlemen. It’s nice to see you again,” Tabitha said.

“Still bulimic, I see,” Gage said, making her gasp. The other men laughed.

The woman was beyond skinny, but it was the way to look if you wanted to be in her circle of friends.

“You bastard,” Tabitha hissed. She yanked on Rafael’s arm. “Come on, darling. I can’t be around people like this.”

Rafael moved away from them and headed to where Trowbridge was standing. They shook hands and immediately started talking about business.

“Oh, isn’t that sweet,” Tabitha said.

“What?”

“The retarded girls are here.”

He knew she meant the littles, and it pissed him off. He looked over, and his heart about stopped.

His little Mara stood just inside the doors with the others. She was dressed in a shimmery white dress that made her skin look luminous. Her blonde hair was curled and fell around her shoulders and down her back. She wore short heels, but they made her legs look great. He could tell she had on makeup from where he stood, although it made her look beautiful. He liked her natural beauty better.

“Oh, man. I wonder if that woman is taken,” a man in their circle said, making Rafael want to punch him.

She turned his way, and her eyes lit up when her gaze went down to where Tabitha had her arm linked to his and was pressed up tightly against his side. Jesus, he saw the devastation in her eyes and her face pale.

“I’ll be right back.”

He walked over to her and grabbed her upper arm, dragging her out into the hallway and down a bit so they had some privacy. Rafael kept a tight grip on her arm and bent to get in her face.

“What the fuck are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at home.”

He hated the tears that ran out of the corners of her eyes.

“I ... I thought if you saw me looking nice, you wouldn’t be embarrassed by me and would want to be with me. I didn’t know you had someone else.”

“Dammit. She’s just someone I take to shit like this.”

“Because she doesn’t embarrass you.”

Fuck, the whole night fucking sucked. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ll talk about this at home.”

She shook her head and tried to pull away from him.

“Rafael, please let go. You’re hurting me.”

He looked at his grip and saw the red marks he put there. He grabbed onto her hand and led her to an empty room. He got out his phone.

“Jorge, Mara is coming down. Please take her home and then come back for me.”

He saw the look in her eyes and had seen it once before when Tiny was killed.

“Listen, honey. We’ll talk about this.”

She shook her head. “No. I want to go home.”

“I know. Jorge is going to take you.”

“No, I meant my real home.”

It made him sick when she described how hurt she was and she wanted to leave him.

He grabbed onto her shoulders. “Listen. I’ll fix this. I’ll be home in a bit.”

“Rafael, darling, Mr. Trowbridge is looking for you,”

Oh, Jesus. “I’ll be right there.”

“All right. Don’t make me wait.”

God, he wanted to strangle Tabitha right then.

He was so torn, but if he could spend an hour with Trowbridge, he’d be home to take care of her.

“Go, honey. I’ll be home soon.”

He tried pulling her toward the elevator, and she yanked away. She ran toward the stairs and didn’t stop when he yelled.

He called down and told Jorge she was coming. He just wanted this night over with.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mara felt her limbs start to shake when they stepped out of the car in front of the building.

“Are you guys sure?” she asked for the hundredth time.

They giggled and started pulling her along.

The three other women talked as the elevator rose. She’d never been this nervous in all her life. The shaking got worse, and she had the urge to pee.

The door opened, and she immediately heard all the voices talking and several people in the doorway.

“Come on. I know where our daddies will be,” Larkin said.

They got inside the door. The girls walked off to the left as her eyes scanned the room.

Her gaze stopped on a couple. It didn’t sink in at first that it was Rafael with a beautiful woman wrapped around him. It was like she was frozen. She saw him headed her way.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

God, he didn’t want her anywhere around people. She could feel her world shatter, and her first instinct was to run home to the farm. When she was there, she was happy.

“I thought if you saw me like this, you wouldn’t be embarrassed by me. I didn’t know you had someone...” God, she didn’t want to say the words.

When he talked about it, he said he took the other woman to things like that, and Mara took it to mean she fit better than her.

She tried to yank her arm from his grip, only to have it tighten painfully. He released her arm but took her hand, pulling her into another room. She heard him talk to someone, but it was like her brain was shutting down, and she guessed it was to protect herself.

“I want to go home.” It was the only thing she could think of. If she made it back to the farm, she’d be okay.

“Jorge will take you.”

“No, I meant my real home. I knew I didn’t belong here. I just wish you would have said something to me about not being what you wanted because I can’t take any more hurt. I’d rather be stabbed a hundred times than feel this way. I just can’t be here. Let me go.”

He talked about fixing it, but there was nothing to fix. She couldn’t take his touching her because it was burning her. She tore away and found the stairwell. She lost a shoe halfway down and then tossed the other one.

She ignored his yelling for her and ran like her life depended on it. It did because the pain was so great that she just wanted to lie down and die. Mara got to the bottom and was headed toward the front doors when she saw Jorge waiting for her. She couldn’t let anyone see her. Not for a while.

Mara took off down another hallway and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw an exit door. She flew out and then skidded to a stop when she found herself in a dingy back alley. It was terrifying and smelled so bad.

She turned to go back into the building, and the door wouldn’t budge. “Oh, God.” She felt like a small animal trying to find a safe place so the fox wouldn’t eat her.

One alley became two and then another as she ran without a destination, and she’d never been in a city by herself, so she was terrified she’d be lost forever, or someone would hurt her. She started checking business doors to see if they were unlocked, and her crying became manic as she struggled to get somewhere that wasn’t as scary as the streets.

Finally, one opened, and she raced inside. She frantically looked around and found an elevator. The elevator door opened, and she stepped in and pushed the first button her finger was in contact with. The elevator rose and then stopped. When the door opened, she stepped out to see the

dark hallways and stepped back in. She did this several times and became more frantic to find a hiding place.

Her eyes widened when the door opened again, and a man she didn't know stood there.

The man frowned. "What in the world? Honey, what are you doing here?"

She stared.

"Tell me your name."

She shook her head and pushed herself into the corner.

"All right." He stepped on. "Easy. I'm a doctor. I won't hurt you. Can you tell me anything about yourself?"

She shook her head.

He sighed.

They went down to the first floor, and the elevator doors opened.

"Let's just sit over here."

She stayed as far away from him as possible but sat in one of the chairs.

"Okay. This is good. My name is Alex. Can you give me a hint at yours?"

She shook her head.

"All right. I think we should go to the hospital so they can check you out."

She screamed and tried to run. He caught her carefully.

"Easy. We won't go. Sit back down."

She did but was ready to run.

"Oh, honey, what did you do to your feet?"

She looked down. She could see the little cuts and the blood. "I don't know."

"Okay, I'm glad you have a voice. Now about your feet. They're also filthy. Did you run without shoes?"

“Yes.”

“We need to get them cleaned as soon as possible,” Alex said.

“Why?”

“Because you could get a serious infection if we don’t.”

She shrugged—nothing mattered.

“You don’t care that you could get sick?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“Okay, we’ll figure it out. Our best bet if we’re not going to the hospital is to go to my home. I can take care of you.”

She shook her head.

“Honey, where else would you go? Is there a friend I can call for you?”

She thought of Larkin but wasn’t ready to answer any questions. “No.”

He sighed. “Then will you trust me enough to come home with me?”

“I won’t trust anyone ever again.”

“Okay, we’ll deal with that later, too. I’m your best choice.”

Her thoughts were still muddled in her head, making it hard to decide.

“Please,” Alex said.

She nodded.

“All right. My car is out back. Let’s get you home.”

She stood and cried out.

Alex cursed and sat her back down. He lifted each foot, and she could tell he wasn’t happy about what he saw.

“It looks like you have things embedded in your feet. You must not have known you stepped on anything.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t.”

“Okay. I’ll have to carry you. You can’t walk on them. Would that be all right?”

She nodded.

Alex was very gentle when he picked her up and carried her out to his car. He got her in the front seat and buckled her up.

“I’m getting blood on your car,” she said. She needed to focus on something other than the pain in her chest.

He chuckled. “It’s not the first blood in here. Remember, I’m a doctor.”

“What kind?” she asked.

“Family.”

“So, you can take care of everyone?” she asked.

“Yes, honey.”

They drove for a while. “Alex?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Can a person die from a broken heart?”

He reached for her hand. “No, sweetheart. It may feel that way now, but I guarantee you’ll feel better in the future.”

“I hope so.” Because she couldn’t take any more.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They were pulling into a garage when she opened her eyes. She hadn't known she'd fallen asleep.

"I'm sorry."

He glanced at her as he put his car in park. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because I fell asleep."

He turned off the car and then reached out to grab her chin. "Don't be. I was pleased to see you resting. You need it. Now, let's get you into the house."

She nodded.

He lifted her out of the car, walked into the kitchen, sat her on a chair and her feet on another.

"Don't put your feet down. I'm going to get a water basin to soak your feet."

She nodded and looked around. It was a very nice house with a beautiful kitchen. There were no maids, butlers, or cooks.

"Why couldn't you have been the one?"

He glanced at her as he set the basin down in front of her, put a towel into soft the surface, and gently lowered her feet. "For what, honey?"

"To visit my farm," she said. She knew she had confused him but needed to get it all out. For all she knew, he was gay or already in a relationship or didn't find her attractive. Her Daddy sure hadn't.

"Don't move your feet. I want them on the side like this, so you're not putting pressure on your injuries."

He looked up and cursed, stood, lifted her, put her on his lap, and cradled her against his chest as she sobbed.

She hadn't known she'd been silently crying.

“I promise everything’s going to be all right,” he said.

She shook her head. “Nothing will ever be the same.”

He sighed. “How about we take care of you, and then I’ll get you settled in my guest room?”

“So, you’ll let me stay until I can return to the farm?”

“I’ve got a lot of questions, but yes. You can stay here for as long as you need. But I know someone is looking for you.”

She shrugged.

“Are you sure there’s no one I can call for you?”

She shook her head.

“How about your name?”

She shook her head again.

“All right. When you’re ready,” Alex said.

She looked down at the beautiful dress Larkin had given her and teared up again.

“What?”

“I ruined her dress,” she said.

“Who?”

“Lar ... just a friend of mine.” She hoped she’d stopped before he realized who she was talking about. There was a big chance he had no idea who she was, but she wasn’t taking a risk of him knowing her.

“Do you have a daddy?”

She hadn’t realized what he’d said at first. “What? No, I mean yes. But he died a long time ago.”

“That’s not the type of daddy I’m talking about, and you know it,” Alex said.

Mara tensed and looked away. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“All right. Don’t get upset.”

She relaxed.

“By the way, you’re an awful liar.”

She gasped and tilted her head back. “I am not.”

Alex just grinned. “I think your feet have soaked enough. I want to examine them in the bedroom. You’ll have to be facedown on the bed, okay?”

She nodded. She relaxed when he set her down on her stomach with her head on her hands.

“I’ll be right back with what I’ll need.”

“Okay”

He left the room before she felt soft fur brush against her arm. She lifted her head to see a cat that had been in one fight too many. He had half of one ear gone and a scar over one eye. She was amazed he still had it. There were puffs of fur missing, but he was still the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

“Hi, kitty. My name is Mara, and I’m having a really bad day. Will you come to cuddle with me?”

The cat tucked his body against her side and purred.

“Thank you. You make me feel better.”

“Holy shit,” Alex said, making her raise her head and the cat hiss.

“What’s wrong?”

“That cat won’t let anyone, including me, touch him.”

She petted the cat that curled back up to her.

“We both feel unloved,” she said.

“Well, I can guarantee you’re both loved. I took him in when he was about half dead. He looks much better than he did.”

She smiled and rubbed the cat’s head. “He’s very handsome.”

Alex sputtered, making the cat hiss at him.

“Don’t get startled when I touch your feet. Tell me if anything hurts.”

“Okay. What’s his name?”

“Cat.”

“Yeah, the cat?”

“That’s his name.”

“Well, that’s why he isn’t settled in yet,” Mara said. “He needs a name to feel like he’s part of the family.”

She looked over her shoulder when Alex made a sound. “You’re not laughing at us, are you, Alex?”

Alex snorted. “Nope. I’m too busy taking care of you.”

“Pick a few names?”

“Oh, um, how about Spike?” he asked.

She looked at the kitty and shook her head. “He doesn’t like that one. Pick another.”

They went through several more.

“How about Max?” Alex asked.

The cat meowed, making her smile. “He likes that one.”

“Then Max it is,” Alex said. “I want you to shower, and then I’ll put bandages on the cuts on the bottom of your feet.”

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“It wasn’t good, honey. You had several things like glass, even a piece of metal. You must have been very upset to run on feet like those.”

She nodded and played with the cat’s paw. “I was.”

“Let’s get you in the shower. Walk carefully ... if it hurts, I’ll carry you.”

She stood and gently put weight on her feet. They stung in places but did not hurt.

“I think I’m okay.”

“All right, follow me.”

They walked into a big bright bathroom, and Alex got a few towels and started the shower.

“Do you need help?”

She thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“I’ll get you something to wear. Call out if you need me.”

“Thank you.” She thanked God for sending her this angel because she had no idea where she would have gone. Now she just needed to get through the next few hours or days and all the decisions she had to make.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

She waited until the door closed and then started to undress. She gasped when she caught her reflection in the mirror. All her makeup the girls had spent so much time on was streaked down her face. She had dirt all over, and her hair looked wild.

She thought about calling the girls, but then their daddies would know and tell Rafael, and he was the last one she wanted to see.

She scrubbed herself a few times before turning off the water and grabbing one of the towels Alex left—that one she wrapped around her before grabbing the other one for her hair. This time when she looked in the mirror, she was scrubbed clean.

“I left a shirt on the counter,” Alex said through the door.

That’s when she noticed the dress shirt. She put that on and then started to dry her hair.

“Are you decent?”

“Yes.”

Alex walked in and stopped short for a moment.

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Now, I can see you, and you’re beautiful. And I think you look way better in that shirt than I ever did.”

She snorted.

“Let me help you with your hair.”

“How?”

“I’ll blow-dry it. You look like you’re going to collapse at any moment.”

She did feel tired and could feel her emotions start to rise again. She wanted to be alone.

“Yes, please.” While he did that, the cat wound around her legs.

“He likes you way better than me, maybe you should take him.”

She looked down at Max and shook her head. “I can’t. I don’t have a home here. The one I have is far away.”

“Do you think you’ll go back?”

“Yes. I’m going back. I have nowhere else to go. I need to get my strength up to make plans.”

Alex placed a hand on her shoulder. “Tell me what I can do to help.”

“You’ve already done so much.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just know that you’re not alone.”

She blinked several times and nodded. It helped to know that.

“Let’s get your feet wrapped and into bed.”

She followed him down the hallway and into another bedroom.

“This is very nice.” The room was done in soothing warm tones. The drapes, carpet, and comforter colors were blues, green, and yellow.

“Thank you. Don’t give me any credit. It was like this when I moved in. Lay down on your stomach again.”

She lay on the mattress and smiled when Max jumped up to rub against her. Alex put some kind of gel on the bottoms and then wrapped them in gauze.

“You can turn over, honey.”

She rolled.

“Do you know when you last had a tetanus shot?” Alex asked.

She shook her head.

“I need to give you one then and a shot for antibiotics. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Then roll to your side. I will give them both in your buttocks.”

She cradled her head on her arm and stared at the wall.

“Here’s the first one.”

She flinched but didn’t say anything.

“This is the last one,” Alex said.

The second was a bit easier.

Alex rubbed and patted her hip. “All done. You did really well.”

“Thank you.”

He rolled her to her back and saw the tears she could no longer keep in.

“Oh, honey. I wish you’d tell me your name and what happened.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

Alex lifted her until her back was against the headboard and gave her a box of Kleenex.

“I really want to hold you, but we’d have to move to a chair because being on the bed with you is inappropriate.”

She shook her head and wiped the tears from her cheek. “No, thank you. I think I want some alone time.”

He studied her for a moment. “That’s fine, but I’ll be checking on you.”

She nodded.

Alex walked to the door. “Call if you need me.”

“Alex,” Mara called out to stop him.

“What?”

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m glad I was here for you.”

The door had just closed when the first sob ripped from her throat. She buried her face in her pillow and cried until she was exhausted, and her pillow was sopping wet.

She felt the cat rub against her trying to give her comfort.

She flipped the pillow to the dry side, wiped her face off, and blew her nose before she laid down and stared at the wall.

So many thoughts and ideas rolled through her mind, and none seemed feasible. She racked her brain and couldn’t find a solution to her problem. Her eyelids started to droop, and she cuddled the cat against her stomach. She decided to sleep and make decisions in the morning.

Chapter Thirty

It was 3:00 AM, and Rafael was about ready to lose it. They had the cops looking all over town for his baby, but there was no sign of her.

He stood looking out the window in his office down at the mostly deserted dark street, going over everything he'd done wrong. He was flabbergasted that she hadn't said or done anything before. None of the blame went on her. It was all on his shoulders, and he would do everything he could to make it right, so she stayed with him. He knew he had a lot to learn and wanted to do it together.

His phone rang. "Hello."

"This is Tony. This was my first chance to get back. What's going on?"

Rafael went over everything. How he'd kept her on his property since they got there, didn't give her the time he should have, and then the debacle of what happened that night.

He heard Tony sigh.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't be able to deal with her."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you've been spoiled your whole life, son. You've always gotten what you wanted but never had a relationship before. You don't know what it takes."

Rafael's teeth snapped together. He wanted to rail against the old man and tell him he didn't know what he was talking about, but he couldn't because he was right.

"I love her," Rafael said. "I'll do whatever I need to get her back."

Tony sighed. "It might be too late. You've neglected her and hurt her in the worst ways possible. By being with another woman, pushing her away to stay with the other woman. Telling her she's not good enough. I know for a fact

she was feeling that way before. Now, I don't think she'll ever believe you if you tell her differently."

Rafael sat down in his chair and put his face in his hand with an elbow on the desk. "Tony, I've never fucked up this bad in my life. Please help me."

He was shocked to hear his voice crack or that he asked for help.

"I'll have to see some change, son. I feel responsible for her feeling pain now. I'd never forgive myself if I did it again," Tony said.

"I'll do whatever I have to."

"We need to find her first. I'll have my eyes on her farm here. Call the moment you find her."

"I will. Thank you, Tony."

"Don't thank me yet."

Rafael set his phone down and pressed his face into both of his hands. Jesus, how did he become such a fuck-up loser? He could hear everyone's disappointment, but it wasn't near what he felt for himself.

There was a knock on his office door.

"Come in."

Darian walked in and sat in a chair on the other side of his desk.

"I'd ask how you're holding up, but I can see it in your eyes."

"I'm at a loss."

"This can work out, but you'll have to change a lot of shit," Darian said.

"I know that. I'm going to need help," Rafael said.

Darian looked surprised. "You've never asked for help before in your life."

"No, I haven't, but I've never had anything this important to me before, either."

Darian nodded. "I'll do what I can to help."

Rafael leaned back and sighed.

Darian sighed. "Why don't you go home? We've got every cop and security team out trying to find her. You won't want them to bring her here when they find her. Jorge is waiting for you downstairs."

Rafael stood and walked out his door, followed by Darian. They stepped into the elevator and pushed the "down" button.

"Darian."

"What?"

"What if they don't find her?"

"They will."

"Before she gets hurt?"

Darian sighed. "I don't know that. I'm just praying very hard."

They walked out the back door to see both of their cars.

"Call me when you hear anything or if you need to talk," Darian said.

Rafael nodded.

Darian gripped his shoulder. "I have discovered over the years that littles have an amazing amount of love and forgiveness. I learned that firsthand with my Larkin."

"Yeah, I remember that." It gave him hope.

"Talk to you soon," Darian said and got in his car.

Rafael turned to see Jorge waiting with the door open. He stopped before getting in. "Thank you, Jorge, for staying up this late."

"I wouldn't have been able to sleep with Miss Mara missing."

Rafael nodded. “We’ll get her back, and I’ll make sure she never wants to leave us again.”

“I hope so, sir. She’s a very special lady.”

“Yes, she is.”

Rafael sighed as he relaxed back against the seat. He went over everything in his head time and again. When they got to his house, he had a massive headache.

“Good night, Jorge,” Rafael said as he got out of the car.

“Good night, sir.”

Rafael was at the door when it opened.

“Landry, what are you doing up at this time?”

“None of us can sleep until we know Miss Mara is safe.”

Rafael nodded. “I’ll be in my office.”

“Can I get you anything, sir?”

He shook his head. “No, but thank you.”

The first thing he did when he got into his office was walk to the bar, pour himself a scotch, and then knock it back before pouring a double. He sat in the chair and stared off into space.

Rafael stood up and paced for a while. He just needed to know she was okay. They’d work on the rest, but her safety was the most important thing right now.

The light of dawn brightened the sky, and there was still no clue where she’d gone.

There was a knock at the door. “Come in.”

Landry walked in with a tray. “Here are some coffee, eggs, toast, and fruit. You need to keep your strength up, sir.”

He looked at the food and got nauseous. “I’ll try, Landry. Thank you.”

“You should get a little sleep. Maybe a nap on the sofa. You look ready to collapse. You’ll hear the phone, and I’ll send in anyone that comes.”

“I’ll try. Thank you.”

The door closed quietly behind the butler. He couldn’t bring himself to eat, and the thought of lying down anywhere without Mara beside him made his throat clog with emotion.

He could get some rest in his chair. All he needed to do was close his eyes. The problem was that he saw her when he did that, and the look in her eyes when she ran from him, so he knew he wouldn’t rest for a while. Not until she was back with him where she belonged.

Chapter Thirty-One

Mara opened her eyes and squinted at the sun entering the room. Her head throbbed enough that any light sent piercing pain through her head. She'd only been awake a few minutes when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Alex walked in. "I'm glad you're up." He studied her. "Do you need some aspirin, honey?"

She struggled to sit up and nodded. "Yes, please."

Alex was back with a glass of juice and pills. "Take these."

"Thank you." The pills and glass of juice slid down her throat, making it feel better.

"I need to look at your feet."

"Okay."

He pulled back the blanket and unwrapped her feet. He studied them and touched a few of the injuries.

"I'd like to wrap them again just for today. A few were deep enough that I'm afraid of infection."

"Okay."

She giggled at one point when he touched a ticklish spot, making him grin.

"I'm done. Let's get you up to use the restroom and then come in for breakfast."

The thought of food did not sound appealing.

He must have caught her look because he set a hand on her ankle. "You'll try to eat for me. Okay?"

She sighed and nodded.

"All right. Good. I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Mara walked into the bathroom off the hallway. She used the toilet and then washed her hands. The first look at her face made her grimace. Her eyes were swollen and red, and her skin was blotchy and pale. God, she looked awful.

She washed her face with cold water, which helped with the color and the swelling. When she was finished, she moved toward the sound of pots. His house was large but not as big as Rafael's.

“Ah, there you are. Are you allergic to anything?” Alex asked.

She shook her head.

“Can you eat an egg and toast?”

“I'll try, but my tummy hurts.”

“I know. But this will help.”

She nodded and started taking little bites.

He set a glass of juice in front of her.

When she set her fork down, she pushed it away. She'd been able to take several bites, but she could feel it churning in her stomach. But she drank the rest of her juice.

Alex took the plate from her without a word. She watched him tidy the kitchen before he sat down beside her.

“What do you want to do today?”

“I have some calls to make. May I use your phone?”

“Of course. Are you ready to tell me your name?”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “I'm afraid.”

“Of what, honey?”

She shrugged.

“Can you talk about why you ran last night?” he asked.

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “I'm in a—or I *was*—in a relationship with someone. I lived far away, and he brought me here but then started ignoring me. Last night I had some friends help me dress up to look like a

sophisticated lady and go to this business thing he had to go to.”

She wiped the tear away. “W-when I got there, he was with another woman.”

“Jesus.”

“He saw me, got furious, and pulled me out of the room. He yelled at me and told me to go back down and Jor ... his driver, would take me home. He told me we’d talk about it when he got home.”

“I told him to let me go and return to his girlfriend, which made him angrier. I ran. I didn’t want to go to his home and couldn’t think of where else to go.”

“Why did you run into my building?”

“It was the first one unlocked.”

“What were you going to do?” Alex asked.

She looked down in embarrassment. “Find a quiet place to hide. You must think I’m a big baby.”

Alex cupped her chin in his hand. “Not at all. What happened to you was horrible, and I’d probably do the same thing.”

“Really?”

“Yes, honey. May I ask where you’re from?”

“Iowa.”

He nodded. “Do you have family there?”

She shook her head. “No, just my father’s best friend who looked after me before I moved.”

“Would he take you in if I get you there?”

“Maybe, but I still have a farm there.”

“That’s good, right?”

“It’s just when he moved me here, he moved my animals, too.”

“Do you want to take them back home?”

“I don’t see how. It took four large trailers and ten guys to move them.” She swallowed several times to keep from crying. “So, my dilemma is if I leave, I leave my animals. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m going to ask you something, but wait until I’m finished to say no. How about you talk to the man? Maybe there are things you don’t know.”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Think about it.”

She sighed and nodded. “I will. May I use a phone, please?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

He took her into a large office that was crammed with books. “Sit behind my desk and call whoever you need to.”

“How can I find a person’s number?”

“You could use the Internet.”

“He’s a groundskeeper at the place I lived.”

“That might be harder. Do you know his full name?”

She nodded.

“Okay, let me help you.”

He lifted her on top of the desk and sat down in the chair beside her. She watched him start the computer and go to a certain site.

“Okay, what’s his name?” Alex asked.

“Porter Billings.”

Alex pulled up all the men with that name in a fifty-mile radius. Thankfully, the name was unusual enough. There was just one.

“There you go.”

She smiled. “I can’t believe you did it that fast.”

“I’m good at a few things.”

She rolled her eyes. "I'm guessing a lot more."

He grinned. "I'll be in the kitchen. Yell if you need me."

"All right."

Mara sat in the chair and dialed the number.

"Hello."

"Porter?"

"Oh, my. Mara. Where are you? Everyone has been looking for you."

"I'm safe with a friend. I've got a huge favor."

"Anything."

"Can you take care of the animals until I find a way to get them back home?"

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, I have to. When I have time, I'll tell you. If there's a chance I can only take one or two, do you think you'd want to have the rest of them?"

"Mara. I can't imagine this farm without you."

"I know. It breaks my heart, but I don't have a choice."

"Have you talked to Mr. Saunders?"

"Not yet, but I will. I can find someone else that would take them, but I know you already love them."

"I do. Very much. I'll keep them as long as you need me to, even if it's forever."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Thank you. You have no idea how much this means. They were my biggest worry."

"Mara, may I tell Mr. Saunders that you're all right? I can't tell him where you are."

"That's true. Yes, just tell him I'll get in touch with him after a while, that I'm fine, and to leave me alone."

“I’ll tell him. I sure wish I could see you soon,” Porter said.

“I hope so, too. I really enjoyed working with you. Now that I have your number, I’ll call.”

“You do that. Stay safe.”

“You, too. Give them all a hug from me.”

“I will.”

She hung up, put the phone down, and started crying. Her whole world was torn apart. How would she ever feel better or get her life back on track?

After several minutes, she sat up and wiped her face with her hands. One thing at a time, she thought. She always had her farm and Tony to fall back on, so she wasn’t totally alone.

She walked out to the kitchen to see Alex drinking coffee, reading the paper, and watching the news on a small TV in the corner. She slid into the seat next to him.

He smiled, folded the paper, and set it aside. “How did it go?”

“I think okay. He’ll be able to take care of my animals indefinitely. He even agreed he’d keep them if I couldn’t get them back.”

“Are you okay with that?” Alex asked.

The tears started again, and she shrugged. “If I have to leave them, then Porter is the one I’d choose to take them.”

Alex reached out and squeezed her hand. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

“I’m so glad I found you.”

Alex smiled. “I am, too.”

Mara gasped when she heard her name on the TV, and a picture of her came up.

“If you have seen this woman, please call the numbers below. A million-dollar reward is out for her. She left the

Mayer building last night around eight and hasn't been seen since. Every available agency is out looking for her."

"So, I'm guessing your name is Mara?" Alex said and grinned.

She nodded. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"It's all right. What should we do about this?"

"We need to call someone, don't we?"

"Yes," Alex said.

"Did that newsman really say one-million-dollar reward?" she asked.

Alex nodded. "Someone really wants you back."

"Who should I call?"

"I would call the person you're running from. A million dollars is a lot of money. I can see everyone out on the street looking for you. Some are probably not so nice, so I'd like you protected. I have very little staff this weekend and no security."

She rubbed her forehead. "I don't know what to do. I'm scared to talk to him."

"Is he violent?" Alex asked.

"No. He grabbed me hard last night but didn't leave a bruise or anything."

"He can't hurt you over the phone."

Alex probably wanted to get rid of her, too. He didn't sign up for all this drama.

"Okay, I'll call him."

"They didn't say who the man was. Can I know that?"

"Rafael Saunders. Do you know him?"

Alex chuckled. "Jesus. Yeah. We've been friends for a long time. We went to school together."

Her eyes widened. "Are you going to get in any trouble?"

“No. I’m thinking of hurting the idiot, though. I might get arrested for that.”

She gasped and grabbed onto his arm. “No. Please. I don’t want you hurt.”

He patted her back. “Stop worrying about me. When do you want to call the butthead?”

“Can I shower first?”

“Sure. By the way. Rafael can be an idiot, but what I’ve heard about you was he’s madly in love with you.”

“Why would he be with another woman?”

“That’s a good question. I have a lot of them. I also want to know why he’s working so much. If I had to guess, he’s running scared because you make him feel things he never had. I don’t remember him ever having a relationship or liking a girl.”

Mara nodded. “He really said that about loving me?”

He smiled gently. “Yes, he did, sweetheart. Now, let’s get you into a shower, and I’ll try to find clothes you can wear outside of the house.”

She inhaled and nodded. This was one of those times she had to pull up her big girl panties and get the job done, even if it broke her heart.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Rafael rubbed his eyes and took another drink from his cup of coffee. He grabbed the phone and answered.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Saunders, this is Porter. Mara just called me.”

Rafael sprang to his feet. “She what? Where is she? What did she say?”

“She asked me if I could take care of the animals for her until she could take them home. She also talked about leaving most or all here if she had to.”

“She has to come back,” Rafael said.

“It didn’t sound like she was going to, sir.”

“That’s unacceptable. We need to have this out.”

“I think she’ll call you soon. I just wanted to let you know she was well and safe,” Porter said.

“She gave no clue where she was?”

“No, sir, but I have the number she called from. That might help.”

Jesus, why the hell didn’t he think of that? “Yes, I’ll take it.” Rafael scribbled the number down quickly. “Thank you, Porter. She’ll be coming back.”

“I hope so, sir.”

Rafael looked at the number. “Why does it look familiar?”

He didn’t waste another moment but dialed the number.

A man answered the phone, and at first, Rafael was extremely confused. “Alex?”

“Hey.”

“Hey? Goddammit, is my little with you?” Rafael asked.

“Yes. I believe so.”

God, he was going to strangle his friend if he didn't stop messing around. “Why the hell is she with you?”

Alex sighed. “I found her in my building last night. She was extremely distraught, and her feet were injured.”

“How?”

“She ran through the street and alleys barefoot.”

“Fuck. She lost her shoes at the place we were at,” Rafael said. “Is she okay?”

“Her feet will heal. I just don't know about the rest of it. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Rafael rubbed the back of his neck. “I fucked up.”

“I know that much.”

“I brought Mara home about eight weeks ago. In that time, I never took her anywhere. I told myself I was too busy, but I was afraid to scare her any more than she already was.”

“Scared of what?”

“My life. If she wasn't with her animals, she looked lost. I think the house and the servants made her feel inferior or something. Every time I saw her, I was terrified she would tell me she wanted to return to her farm.”

“I can understand that,” Alex said. “It sounds like you love her, man. I never thought I'd see the day. Now tell me about last night and the other woman.”

“I had one of those meet-and-great things, and I was supposed to meet a potential partner on a project. I had Tabitha come with me.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

“Because I knew if Mara were with me, my whole focus would be on her, not the business. The man is big into

families and dislikes working with single men. I feared my Mara would get even more scared and want to run.”

“That’s why you worked late?”

Rafael sighed. “Yeah, there were a few reasons. One is if I came home when she was asleep, I wouldn’t be able to ... be inside of her like I desperately wanted to, twenty-four hours a day. I can’t get enough of her. I had to take naps at work because I’d spend half the night just looking at her. Alex, I can’t fucking lose her. I know I fucked up, and I take full responsibility for everything. I’m going to beg her for another chance.”

“It might take some doing,” Alex said.

“I know. I had an epiphany this morning.”

“Hell. That sounds like it hurts,” Alex said.

Rafael almost smiled. “Fuck off. It wasn’t her fear I was most worried about. It was mine that was causing the problem.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Alex asked.

“First, I need to get her home and have a conversation so I can tell her everything. I thought that if we got back on track, I would take her to Paris or something, but instead, I’ll take her to a few places around here with abused or neglected animals we can bring home. That’s when she’s the happiest.”

“I don’t know her very well, but she has talked much about her animals, so I’d agree with you.”

“Will she come here if you bring her, or should I pick her up?” Rafael asked.

“How about I ask her, and we’ll call you back?” Alex said.

“Do you think there’s a chance she’d talk to me now?”

“I think she’s in the shower.”

“Okay. Call me when you know. I’ll call off the cops and security.”

“Talk to you soon.”

Rafael took a few deep breaths to calm his anxiety before calling his head of security and then sat back and relaxed. The fact he knew she was safe and with one of the men he trusted made him feel so much better. But he wouldn't feel whole until she came home and forgave him.

He knew there was still a chance he'd lose her, but he'd try everything he could to keep her with him and for her to forgive him.

He'd pray harder than ever before that he'd have her in his bed that night.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Alex hung up and looked over his shoulder at her.

“You heard everything?”

She nodded. “I think most of it.”

“What did you think?” Alex asked.

She didn't know what to think. She hated hearing the pain in his tone but feared getting hurt again. “I don't know.”

“I won't tell you what to do, but I have to tell you I've known that man most of my life, and I've never heard him this upset or insecure.”

She hated that. A thought popped into her head. “What if I'm not what's best for him?”

Alex snorted. “Honey, you're the best thing that's ever happened to him or will ever happen. You're his only chance at love.”

“Oh, wow, Alex. No pressure there,” she said sarcastically.

Alex chuckled. “It's just what I know, honey. I also know that man will make mistakes because we all do, but he does a good job of not making the same mistake twice.”

She liked hearing that. She thought about talking to Larkin because she'd been through something that almost broke her and Darian up. But now they're better and stronger than they were before.

“Will you take me back to his house?”

“You need to consider it your home too, honey. I know it's hard to get used to but think of everyone around the house as a family. Yes, they serve and pamper you, but I think you deserve it, especially because of all the work you do to save animals.”

She nodded. It would help to think like that.

Alex got her in the car. She almost smiled when she looked down at her outfit. He'd put her in a pair of his socks, sweatpants they had to roll up several times, and a t-shirt that went to her knees.

She stared out the window of Alex's car and got tenser the closer they got.

"Everything is going to be okay," Alex said as he held her hand.

She exhaled and nodded. Her grip on his hand tightened when they pulled up to the house, and Rafael stood at the top step.

"Oh, God. What should I do?"

"You love him, right?"

She nodded.

"Then give him another chance."

"Can I call if I need you?"

"Sweetheart. My door is always open to you. I will be your friend forever. I have to tell you about a few of the things he said in our conversation you might have missed. He stays up at night watching you and doesn't come to bed until you're asleep because he's obsessed with being inside you."

She turned red. "Oh, my God, Alex. I can't believe you just said that."

He grinned. "I didn't. Rafael did. Remember, I'm a doctor, or I at least play one on TV."

She smiled but felt a tear slide down her cheek.

He wiped it away. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"I want to say yes so much, but I have to be a big girl."

"You're a beautiful, sweet, wonderful girl. You're also very strong. You can do this."

She exhaled and nodded. "Okay." She reached across and hugged him tightly. "You are my very best friend. Thank you."

“You’re welcome, and my very best friend, too.”

She smiled and got out of the car, and waved as he drove off before she faced Rafael. Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest when he walked down the steps to her.

“Hi, baby.”

“Hi, Daddy.” God, he looked awful. “Are you sick?”

He smiled. “No. I can’t go to sleep without you beside me, and I couldn’t breathe normally until I saw you just now. I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“Alex found me and took care of me.”

“He’s a good friend,” Rafael said.

They stood silently, looking at each other.

“Can we go up to our suite, baby? I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

She nodded and took the hand.

“Are your feet okay? Or do I need to carry you?”

“They’re fine.”

They got to their suite without anyone stopping them, and he closed and locked the door. He led her to the sofa in their family room.

“Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

She nodded and waited.

He came back with her silky robe.

She held her breath as he took Alex’s clothes off of her and put her robe on.

“I don’t like seeing you in another man’s clothing,” he said.

He stood after making sure she was comfortable and then started pacing.

She watched him go back and forth for several minutes. “Rafael, you’re making me dizzy.”

He stopped right away and came and knelt in front of her. He took her hands and held them in her lap.

“I don’t know where to start,” he said.

“Tell me about the woman?” Her stomach ached just thinking about her.

“She’s an old acquaintance. I’ve known her most of my life. She’s a bitchy snob, but she’d always been good about going with me to these things because a lot of businesspeople don’t like to deal with an old bachelor. But absolutely nothing is between us. I’d never do that to you.”

“But you did in a way. Or it felt like it.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, baby.”

“Why are you embarrassed by me?” It was another question she dreaded asking.

He got closer to her and squeezed her hands. “Never in a million years would I be embarrassed to have you with me. I knew you were having difficulty adapting to the house and our people. I didn’t want to throw even more at you. I also needed to be able to concentrate on the man I went to see last night, but if you had been there, my full attention would have been on you.”

“So, if I stay, I’ll never be able to come with you?”

“Fuck, yes, you will. You’ll be with me everywhere. My fear caused every stupid thing I’ve done to screw this up. I lose it just thinking about you leaving me.”

“I don’t want to. I never did.”

“I must warn you now that I’ll follow you back to the farm if you leave.”

She was surprised by that because she knew he meant it, but as much as she liked the idea, she couldn’t take him away from his world.

“I won’t go.”

He exhaled and then pulled her into his arms.

“I know we have more to discuss, but I need you so much, I hurt.”

She cupped his face. “I don’t like that you’re hurting. I’m your little girl, Daddy. I need you as much as you need me.”

He swept her into his arms, and she knew they would be okay.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Rafael couldn't believe she was there in his arms and that she had forgiven him. He knew there was more to talk over, but he knew he'd never make this kind of mistake again.

He stripped them both and got them into the shower. He wanted to take a bath with her, but they were both too tired. His hands worshiped her body, and they were breathing hard by the time he was done with her.

"I want to wash you, Daddy?"

God, he wanted that more than anything but was already too close. "Next time, baby."

"Okay."

He got some gel on his finger. "Hold onto me."

She did and then jerked when he pushed the finger as far as it would go into her ass. They played a bit but had never got to the point where he made her his in all ways.

"How do you like that?" he asked.

"Oh, God, Daddy."

He slid two fingers into her and watched her expression, looking for any pain or discomfort, but her breathing got more labored, and she tried pushing back against him.

"Daddy."

"I know. Let's try for three." He had thought of fucking her ass in bed, but he couldn't wait.

She took it and begged for more.

"Face the wall, baby."

He gripped her hips to keep her from slipping, lined his cock up to her tiny anus, and started pushing into her.

"Oh, Daddy."

He pressed his body against her, wrapped an arm around her waist, and started sliding in and out of her. He bent her forward so it was easier for her to take him.

They both groaned when he pushed through the muscle and continued to glide in and out in a slow rocking rhythm, sinking every inch of his cock into her until he couldn't go any farther.

“Harder, Daddy.”

He started pumping in and out of her. It wasn't long before he felt her start to tighten on his cock.

“Come for me, baby.”

She screamed and clamped down on him and withered.

He held onto her tightly with one arm and the other he had to brace against the side of the shower as he thrust several more times before he came, filling her ass with his cum. He surmised her shudder and tiny ripple over her body was another small orgasm. He held them steady as he fought to get his heartbeat under control and his strength back.

“Easy, baby. I'm going to lift you off me and then wash you.”

She nodded, but he could tell she was very close to falling asleep, so he hurried. He wrapped a towel around her, set her on the bench on the other side of the shower, and quickly washed.

“Are you okay there for a minute?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He cleaned himself and was back, picking her up and setting her on the counter. He wrapped a towel around his hips and then tackled her hair. Her hair was so long and thick, and he loved playing with it. Right now, he just wanted it dry so he could lay her down.

Finally, after several minutes, he had her cuddled up against him in bed, and he heard her breathing deepen.

“I will do better, baby. I love you so much. I won’t screw up again.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

He grinned and closed his own eyes. They were where they needed to be.

Later, after they woke up, he made her eat, and then they went down to see her animals. He could see her happiness being around them.

He pulled Porter aside. “I want a house built close to the pond.”

Porter’s eyes widened. “For who?”

“Mara has an older couple who cared for her after her father died. They have no family but us, and I want to bring them closer.”

Porter grinned. “Does Mara or they know?”

“Not yet. I don’t want her to know until it’s a done deal. I’m going to call Tony and discuss this with him. I just wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“Do you want me in charge of the builders?”

“That’s up to you. You’ve got a lot on your hands already,” Rafael said.

“I can do it. I’ll hire some of my nephews to help with the animals and grounds.”

“Do whatever you have to.”

“She’s going to be pleased.”

Rafael nodded. “I hope so. I’m also planning to take her to the animal rescue place outside of town, so you’ll have more on your plate because you know she’ll come home with something.”

Porter laughed. “I think we should plan on more than one.”

Rafael smiled. “You’re right. I’m going to leave her down here while I make a few calls.”

“I’ll watch over her.”

He patted Porter’s shoulder. “I know you will.”

Rafael walked over to Mara as she brushed one of the horses. He wrapped an arm around her waist from behind and nuzzled her neck. “Is it okay if I make some calls and then come back down to get you?”

She smiled over her shoulder. “If you have to go to work...”

“No. That’s changing. My hours at the office uptown will be cut back drastically. I’ll do my work here at home to be with you.”

She turned. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’m very serious. It’s something I should have done in the beginning, but as Alex said, I was a pussy.”

Mara laughed. “He’s so funny.”

“Yeah, he’s just hilarious,” he said sarcastically. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Mara giggled and hugged him.

The first thing he did when he got to his office was call an architect friend and ask for three different designs of houses. He gave him the information on the two and told him to consider their ages. He was going to let Tony and Betty decide which one.

He was a little nervous about the next call. “Hi, Tony.”

“Hi. How’s our girl?”

“She’s good. We’ve discussed everything and the changes I’m going to make for her. I’m working from home now, so I’m here. Everywhere I go, she goes. I’m also taking her to animal rescue places around the state to find animals since we have enough room and she has help.”

“That will win her heart,” Tony said. “I’m glad everything worked out. I have to apologize to you...”

Rafael grinned. “No, you don’t. Everything you said was the truth.”

“I know. I could have been gentler about it.”

“No. You did just right. I’ve got an idea that I want to run past you and Betty.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I want to build you a house on my land and have you guys move down here.”

“What?” Tony exclaimed.

Rafael laughed. “You’re the only grandparents we’re going to have, and we need you to be closer.”

There was silence on the other end, but he could tell Tony was trying to get himself under control.

Tony cleared his throat. “This is so unexpected. The thought of being part of your family is a lovely idea. Let me talk to Betty and see what she says. I’d get her on the phone, but she’d just start crying.”

Both men laughed.

“That’s fine. Call me back. Give me your email. I have a friend drawing up three house ideas for you to choose from.”

“Now, wait. This is a lot...”

“Tony. I have plenty of money, and if I can do something for Mara that makes her happy, I will. The fact I’ll get to see you all the time is a bonus. I know it’s probably selfish to ask because you probably have a life and friends there, but I have to try. I totally understand if you decide it wouldn’t be best for you. Mara has no idea about this, so she can’t get disappointed.”

“I’ll talk to Betty and look at the house plans.”

“If you don’t like any of them, please don’t hesitate to tell me. I just asked him for the three, but there are hundreds of options.”

“What can we give you? I can help.”

“You being here is enough, but Mara is going to get more animals, so you might want to help with that.”

“I’d enjoy that.”

“Betty and Ms. Bailey will become friends. She’s the one that feeds all of us. There are other women I think she’ll like, so she won’t get bored.”

“My Betty doesn’t get bored. She has more projects than I can count, and it will take three lifetimes to finish.”

Rafael smiled. “That’s good to know because now we have to give her a large room for things.”

“She would love that. Hell, I would love it. Her craft stuff is all over the house right now,” Tony said.

“Talk to her and think about it. You might tell her we get very little snow and never below-freezing temperatures.”

“She’s always complaining about her old bones and the cold.”

Rafael laughed. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Even if it doesn’t work out, I thank you for thinking of us. It means the world to me.”

“Hey, I know Mara would be thrilled. We both miss you.”

“We miss you, too. Talk to you soon.”

Rafael sat back and grinned. He had a good feeling about this idea, and he couldn’t wait to see the look on Mara’s face when she found out.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Within a week, Tony and his wife agreed and chose which house they wanted, and Rafael got Porter on it and knew construction was already happening. He'd have them moved down before Christmas. He planned on flying them there and hiring movers, so they didn't have to do anything. He wanted to make it as stress-free for them as he could.

Mara asked what was being built when construction crews and building materials kept driving past. He and Porter just told her that a house was being built for a friend, but they never told her who, and she never asked.

He had taken her to an animal rescue, and she brought back several horses, a donkey, and a few older barn cats that had never been adopted. He couldn't believe what a difference it made in her. Mara had also gone shopping with the girls under the supervision of Darian, his driver, and a few guards. She came home exhausted but glowing with happiness.

A few days before Christmas, he took her out of town for lunch and Christmas shopping because he didn't want her to see the moving vans or Tony and Betty until the next day.

Rafael woke up the next morning a little nervous. He knew she would love them being here, but the fact he did it behind her back might make her sad.

"Come on, sleepyhead. I'm hungry," he said as he dressed.

She groaned. "Maybe because you worked off a lot of calories last night."

He sat next to her and grinned. "I'm sorry. Is my baby a little sore?"

She snorted. "Let's just say I won't be horseback riding today."

He threw back his head and laughed.

“If you don’t get out of that bed now, you’ll get a little sorer.”

She sighed dramatically and let him help her to her feet.

After they dressed for the day, he took her to the dining table, and they ate.

“What’s up with you?” Mara asked. “You’re acting funny.”

He grinned. “I have a surprise for you.”

She straightened. “Really. What is it?”

“Finish your breakfast, and I’ll show you.”

They drove the Ranger down the road and around a bend when they saw the house with the pond behind it.

“Oh, that’s pretty. I can’t believe they built it so quickly.”

“I needed it done fast, so they worked double time.”

“Who’s the friend?”

He took her hand and walked to the front door, and knocked.

“This is an early Christmas present.”

The door opened, and Tony stood with a big grin.

They both watched her mouth drop open, then close, and repeated a few times.

“I think she might be a bit surprised,” Tony said, making them laugh.

“I don’t understand?” Mara said and looked at Rafael. “She reminds me of a fish.”

“I know you love these two,” Rafael said.

She nodded. “Yes, very much.”

“And I thought we’d need grandparents for our children, so they moved here.”

“You guys really live here, like forever?”

Tony nodded and then caught her when she threw her arms around him.

“Oh, I’m so happy I could burst,” Mara said, making them all laugh.

She walked over and hugged Betty for a long time, and he noticed they were both crying but had big smiles.

Mara turned to him, and more tears slid down her face as she walked to him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I don’t have the words to express how much this means to me,” Mara said, lifting on her tiptoes and kissing him.

He had no idea how quickly it got passionate when they heard Tony clear his throat loudly. Rafael could swear his red face matched hers. He never blushed, for God’s sake.

“Can you show me around?” she asked Betty.

“Oh, yes. There are still things to unpack, but I’m enjoying this tremendously.”

Mara looked up at Rafael and pressed a kiss to his chin. “Thank you, Daddy. I love you so much.”

He squeezed her and closed his eyes. “Baby, if I loved you any more, I’d burst.”

She laughed and waved to him as she walked away with the older woman.

Rafael looked at Tony to see the grin on his face and scowled.

“You better not tease me?” Rafael said. “Because I’ll throw you into the pond.”

Tony laughed and followed him outside. “First, I don’t think I’d ever tease you. Secondly, that’s too big to be a pond. It’s a lake. Thirdly, I want to talk fish.”

Rafael was totally confused. “Fish?”

“Yes. I thought I saw some in the lake this morning.”

“Well, yeah. I think it’s been fully stocked. Porter keeps it that way because a few of his nephews like to fish.”

“I think I’ll be spending some time here myself.”

“You can do what you want. Ask Porter what kind there are.”

“Maybe his nephews would help me.”

“Oh, I know they will.”

“Good. Have you ever fished?” Tony asked.

“No.”

Tony smiled. “Guess what, you’re going to learn.”

Rafael cringed. “I could try, but you’ll have to put the worm on a hook.” He shuddered, thinking about it.

Tony laughed. “Guess what?”

Rafael was afraid to ask. “What?”

“Now, I’m going to tease you.”

Mara walked out of the house with Betty to see Tony laughing roaringly and him standing with his hands on his hips.

Rafael had so much to be thankful for. Some people probably thought he had everything he needed to make him happy since he was so rich. He’d come to find out it’s not what he had but the people he let into his life that made him truly happy. He couldn’t ask for more.

The End

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

HER MAFIA DESTINY

Macleon Mafia Men, 1

Lila Fox

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Sample Chapter

“Yo, brother, I think you need to go back home and mellow out.”

Alastair turned abruptly to face his brother, Calum, getting in his face and gritting his teeth. “Would you like to say that to me one more time?”

“Jesus Christ.” Calum raised his hands and took a hasty step back. “Man, it’s just that you’re really pissed off....”

“Aren’t you usually like this after talking to your mother?” Alastair asked.

“She’s your stepmother. That counts, nut fuck. But yes, I do. The woman’s a viper. It’s just when you’re pissed like

this, someone usually ends up dead.”

Alastair rolled his eyes, turned, and walked down the long hallway. The woman, Calum’s mother, was his fourth stepmother. Alastair’s mother died a few days after giving birth to him, which ruined his father. From what his family had told him over the years, they had been passionately in love, surprising because of their lifestyle.

Being a part of the mafia was not easy. You had to be cold and vicious to survive. It was especially hard for the women. The wives and mistresses had to deal with a lot.

His father had married four more times, trying to find the love he’d had with Isabella, Alastair’s mother, and it had never happened. This last one, Una, Calum’s mother, was the worst.

The first three stepmothers had died of surprisingly natural causes and not murder like one would expect living with the mafia—one in a car accident, one in an accidental drug overdose, and an accidental fall down the steps.

Alastair had liked that one the most. Nessa had been Logan, Ewen, and Rory’s mother and had been sweet as can be. It had hit his father hard when she passed away. Not as hard as Alastair’s mother, Isabella, but it took a while for him to want to have another woman in the house and in his life.

This last wife was a viper, and Alastair hated her, but he had to get along with her because his father was alive. After the stroke, his father had been unable to lead the Maclean clan, so Alastair had taken over the whole operation then, which was fine because he ran most of it anyway.

He shivered inside. Two minutes with his stepmother was torture. The woman was as mean as they came, and he couldn’t understand what his father saw in her. She might have been attractive if not for the permanent sneer she had on her face.

His brother was probably right, but he couldn’t stand the thought of going home to the same house his stepmother lived in, knowing she’d probably try to hunt him down to talk

some more because he'd walked out on her tirade. The temptation to just kill her was too strong, and he didn't know if his father would ever forgive him.

“What exactly are we looking at?” Calum asked.

“Our strip joint in Newport needs new women, and I sent out some of our guys to find ones who were attractive and loved being a stripper. Most of the ones we have now are getting old and tired, so we'll get them other jobs in the business.”

“Cool. Maybe think about taking one of them home,” Duncan, another brother, said. “It might help your disposition.”

“Fuck off,” Alastair said without turning around.

Alastair opened the door to what could pass as a conference room. It had a long table and chairs and a small bar off to the side. Some meetings went late, and the guys were more pleasant if they had some alcohol in them. But not too much, or they started killing each other.

The women were already there waiting. The ones that noticed him stood as seductively as they could, begging for his or his brothers' attention. Being one of their mistresses was sought after not only for their good looks but mainly for the money.

“Hey,” Stuart, one of his best men who had been with him for years, said and walked over to shake his hand. “I think we did well.”

“You checked for diseases and made sure they had no children?”

“Sure, boss. I know what you like.”

Alastair nodded. “Where's Ross? He was supposed to be helping you.”

“He's coming in with the last one or two.”

Alastair turned to Calum. “Can you get me a bourbon on the rocks?” He wouldn't admit it to his brothers, but he did need to mellow out, and a nice drink helped every time.

“Sure.”

The first drink went down smoothly and helped calm his anger a bit as he talked to Stuart and ignored the women trying to vie for his notice and interest. He shook his head and snorted when his brothers did give the women their attention and had girls all over them.

“Craig is going to take these women to the club if you’re okay with them,” Stuart said.

Alastair turned and whistled for Duncan. “I’m going to put you in charge of this. Take them to Speedy’s, get the women who will live in our apartments next to the club moved in, and take the rest back to their place but tell them they have to be at work tomorrow. If they are late, they’re fired. There are no second chances.”

“I got it,” Duncan said.

His brother and a couple of the men rounded up the women and took them out a back door to the vans waiting.

“Are you going to wait for the last of them?” Stuart asked.

Alastair looked at his watch and sat down. “I’ll give them a few minutes.”

He hadn’t finished with his second drink when a side door opened and Ross, one of his guys, walked in, dragging a woman. She was crying and fighting to get away from him.

“Shut up, bitch,” Ross said and shook her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Stuart yelled.

Alastair held up a hand, set down his drink, and stood to face Ross. He walked to stand in front of the man and crossed his arms over his chest to keep from strangling the man, trying to ignore the woman’s pleas and cries. “Tell me.”

Ross stuttered. “Oh, well, her uncle owed us some money, and I was supposed to get it, but he didn’t have it, and so I thought we could use her as collateral until he pays up.”

Calum, Stuart, and the rest of his guys cursed, and the tension rose in the room.

Alastair just stared at the woman. She was tiny but had curved hips and larger breasts. She was dressed in a long white nightgown with lace. Her dark hair was tousled like she'd been pulled from bed.

"Who gave you permission to do that?" Alastair asked when he turned back at Ross.

"Well, no one. I just thought..."

"Is it your job to think?" Alastair asked.

"Well, no."

"Jesus Christ, you dumbshit," Stuart said.

Alastair walked up, cupped the woman's chin, and raised her face. His breath stalled in his lungs because her eyes were the most beautiful he'd ever seen, even when they were red and swollen from crying. They were light blue in the middle and green on the other part, and they seemed to look right through him.

"Who is your family?" Alastair asked her.

She sniffed. "I don't have one besides an uncle I haven't seen in years."

"No husband?"

"No. Please, let me go home. I won't tell anyone. I don't even know you," she said.

For once in his life, he made a decision with his heart instead of his head. He pulled out a gun and shot Ross in the forehead in one smooth move.

Everyone in the room stood frozen and in shock until the woman screamed.

Alastair put his gun away and reached for her when it looked like she was going to faint, only to have her flinch in horror away from him. He knew why, but it still pissed him off, which was ridiculous. Of course, she would be terrified of him. He just murdered someone in front of her.

He didn't like the blood that had been sprayed over her from Ross's head, and he wanted her clean as soon as possible.

He kept a few feet away from the woman and waited for her to be calm enough to hear him. "My name is Alastair Maclean. We're the mafia in this part of the city."

Alastair heard his brother curse behind him and ignored him.

The woman was hunched against the wall. Tears mixed with blood and brain matter ran down her face. "Why are you telling me this? Are you going to kill me next?"

Alastair shook his head. "I'm making sure that you won't be able to go anywhere, ever."

"I don't understand. I've never done anything to you or anyone."

"I know. Sometimes your life takes a path you didn't expect." *No kidding.* He never predicted he'd kidnap a woman and plan to keep her forever. "My advice is to make the best of this. I'll treat you like a princess as long as you're loyal to me. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. I don't understand any of this."

He sighed. "That's okay. We have plenty of time." He held out his hand and waited.

She shook her head.

"You can either take my hand and walk out of here with some dignity, or I can have a few of my men carry you out. Choose."

She studied him for a moment and before she reached for his hand. He could see how much she was trembling, but he would take care of her as soon as they got home. When her shaking, tiny cold hand slid into his hand, something inside of him settled, and a warmth filled him.

"That's good, baby." He pulled her along and looked at one of his men. "Take care of Ross."

"You got it, boss."

As he led her out to his car, he felt something shift in his universe, and he knew he'd forever be changed. He just didn't know if it would be for the good or bad. Only time would tell.

End of sample chapter

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