



*Home With The*  
**COWBOY**

LESLIE NORTH  
MARY SUE JACKSON



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## Home with the Cowboy



## BLURB

### *Love has a way of changing plans...*

Raised in a small Texas town, all nanny Willa Markson ever wanted was to live in the Big Apple. Now she's about to make her dream come true. She just has to deliver Bobby, the child she is caring for, to his uncle, and help get the boy settled. What she didn't count on was the uncle to be so... distracting. Daniel is a brooding, gorgeous cowboy, who she can't stop thinking about. But nothing is going to get in the way of fulfilling her dream. Not even love...

Daniel desperately needs Willa to stay. Suddenly a single dad, he's overwhelmed by the prospect of caring for a child. His neat, orderly life has been turned upside down, leaving him reeling. Plus, the little guy adores Willa. And it's not long before he adores her, too. Even though he knows she's planning to return to New York, he's determined to make her stay.

If only he could convince her that she belongs in Texas, with him...

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# ONE

The second Willa Markson opened the door of her rental car, the blast of Texas heat and humidity threatened to melt her into a puddle. New York City could get hot, but there was nothing like a Texas summer. She slapped at a mosquito in irritation.

*I'm not going to be here long, she told herself for the thousandth time. I'll just hand Bobby off to his uncle, and then I can get back to civilization.*

Bobby Gunn, her three-and-a-half-year-old charge, was in the backseat rambling about cows the whole time Willa was unbuckling his car seat. Willa smiled as Bobby hopped out and pointed to the cows in the pasture, his eyes comically large.

“Yeah, there are a lot of cows, buddy,” she said. “And look, there are horses, too.” Bobby didn’t have a lot of experience with cows and horses being from New York, but they were farm animals, and they were smelly, both things the kid loved with all of his boyish heart.

As Willa walked Bobby up to the sprawling farmhouse, she wondered for a second if she’d gone to the wrong property, as there didn’t seem to be anyone—anyone human, at least—around. But the house number was right, so this had to be it.

Although the yard was neatly trimmed and the house newly painted, even Willa could see that the house was old: one window had a crack in the corner, most likely from a hailstorm, while the porch steps squealed so ominously that

Willa was afraid she'd fall through the step if she wasn't careful.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the front door opened and a man stepped out. She blinked as she took in his wide shoulders, the cleft in his chin, the stubble on his cheeks. He was dangerously handsome. And his eyes were so blue that her heart stuttered as she gazed into them. Her heart continued to stutter when she saw the look on his face, and it wasn't a pleasant one. He looked like she was a bug he'd found skittering across his kitchen counter.

Well, this must be Daniel Gunn. *And he looks thrilled to see me.*

Willa swallowed, her mouth dry as she stared up at the man. A blush climbed up her face when she realized that she was staring and hadn't said a word.

"You must be Miss Markson," the man said in a heavy Texan drawl as he approached Willa. "I'm Daniel Gunn." He held out his tanned hand and shook hers with a firm grip; Willa barely restrained a shiver at the feeling of his callused palm against her own. Daniel's gaze went to Bobby. "And you must be my nephew. Howdy, cowboy."

Bobby's rambling quieted as he stared at the strange man before he turned and hid behind Willa's legs.

"He's shy around strangers," she explained, then immediately felt bad for saying that Daniel was a stranger in the first place. Willa had heard a few bits of the story of Bobby's family, mostly involving estranged brothers and uncles. Since Bobby's parents had died tragically in a car accident only a few weeks ago, Daniel Gunn was all Bobby had left.

Willa swallowed against the sadness rising inside her. Maybe she was only Bobby's nanny, working as an au pair for his parents Robert and Stacey, but the couple had become her friends, not just her employers. Stacey especially had taken Willa under her wing and had introduced her to all of her favorite places in New York—uptown restaurants, little hole-in-the-wall diners, eclectic bookshops, and indie art galleries. Willa smiled sadly, remembering when Stacey had treated

Willa to lunch at a hotdog stand near Times Square that served the biggest hotdogs Willa had ever seen.

Along with Robert and Stacey, Willa had fallen for Bobby, hook, line, and sinker.

Daniel gestured for her to follow him inside. “My uncle James was going to be here, but he had to run some errands. He’ll be here in a bit. You want some tea? It’s a hot one out there.”

Having grown up in Texas, Willa knew that declining a glass of diabetes-inducing sweet tea was akin to treason, so she smiled and said she’d love a glass. Daniel returned with two glasses just as Bobby scattered a bag of his favorite trains on the living room floor and began playing.

“Thank you again for bringing him all this way,” said Daniel as he handed her a glass of sweet tea. He gestured for her to sit down, and she took a seat on the worn but well-maintained suede couch. “We thought it’d be easier on the boy to be with someone he knew when he came here.”

“Of course. I’m just sorry it all had to come about like this.” She glanced at Bobby, who was strategically keeping his distance from Daniel, though she knew he was listening to them, trying his best to understand. Although he cried for his parents sometimes and was confused about the change of scenery, he still hadn’t quite wrapped his head around the fact that they weren’t ever coming back. Willa wasn’t sure if that was a blessing or a curse yet.

“I set up the guest room for you to stay in,” said Daniel.

Willa’s eyes widened in surprise. Did this guy really think she was going to stay in his house with him? She wasn’t going to stay in Texas a day longer than necessary. “I’m not staying long. I have to get back to New York as soon as possible.”

Daniel had relaxed back into the armchair, but he leaned forward at Willa’s words. His frown was severe enough that Willa’s palms got clammy.

“Not staying?” he said, sounding nervous. “But you’re all my nephew knows.”

Willa turned scarlet, sweat beading on her forehead. Why was it so hot in here? A fan blew in the corner, sluggishly pushing air around, like it knew it could never compete against a Texas summer. She wished she could ask Daniel to crank up the AC, but he didn't look particularly accommodating after her announcement.

Willa sipped her tea as she struggled to figure out what to say, the shock of sugar making her teeth ache. She'd grown up drinking sweet tea, but when you hadn't drunk it for a while, that first sip was always a bit of a surprise. She'd gotten used to tea in the north, usually unsweetened with maybe a slice of lemon, a concoction Willa's father had considered downright blasphemous when he'd visited her once in New York a few years ago.

Searching for the right words, she looked around the room, noting the rack of antlers over the fireplace, what looked like an authentic bearskin rug on the hearth, the cowboy-themed artwork on the walls. Her eye was drawn to an old sampler, its intricate stitchery fading into an age-yellowed background. *Home is where the heart is. Heart is where home is.* She nodded to herself in agreement. The sooner she got back home to New York, the better.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gunn," she said, "but I have a lot that I have to get back for. The timing is terrible, I know, and I'm sorry I can't stay longer. But you're Bobby's family—I'm not. I'm just his nanny."

"Nanny or not, we need you. Bobby has already lost his parents, and he likes you. What can I do to get you to stay?"

His tone was controlled, but Willa could tell his nerves had turned to genuine worry. His jaw was clenched, his eyes narrowed in concern.

"You have to stay," he insisted.

Willa gritted her teeth in frustration. She knew this man meant well, but God Almighty, he was unreasonable. He didn't even know her—what right did he have to tell her what she *had* to do? She couldn't stay here! The last thing she wanted was to get stuck in the state she'd run away from the second she

could. She'd left her hometown years ago because she'd never felt like she'd fit in. She'd wanted to paint, to bask in beautiful artwork. Her hometown's idea of art was faded prints of Texan landscapes and photographs of horses.

After graduating from art school and working tirelessly as an au pair to pay her bills, now she had the chance to interview for a position at one of the most prestigious art galleries in the country. At twenty-four, Willa was ready to set her career on track, and she was not going to let that job slip through her fingers. She'd worked too hard to get to this point.

Bobby gasped then, and Willa jumped up, almost dropping her glass of sweet tea, when she realized he was about to knock over a shiny, glass figurine of a horse. There were dozens of them on the shelf where Bobby had decided to play with his trains. Why were there so many breakable things left out where a child could reach? If she had to guess as she took in the house, none of it was child-proofed. She wanted to groan out loud. Despite needing to get back to New York to prepare for her interview, how could she in good conscience leave Bobby in a house like this?

"Do you have anywhere else to put some of these breakable things?" she asked Daniel as she directed Bobby back to the floor with his train tracks. "Let's play down here, okay, buddy?"

Daniel looked like she'd asked him if he liked to wear high heels, he was so thunderstruck. Willa restrained a laugh. Men!

"What are you talking about? This house is perfectly safe," he said.

"Maybe it would've been considered safe for children thirty years ago, but things have changed." She kept half an eye on Bobby as he started to run the train tracks beneath the coffee table. "He's not a toddler, so it isn't as if you need a baby gate at the top of the stairs. But you should be mindful of the things he could get into. Especially with the environment being new."

When Bobby had first started crawling, Robert had been the one who'd been fastidious about covering outlets, locking cabinets, and putting up gates. It wasn't that Stacey hadn't

cared—far from it. But she was the type of person who didn't always think about details, which was why Robert had been such a great match for her. Willa smiled at the memory of Robert coming home with bags of baby locks and whatnot, turning the house into the most baby-proofed abode in the history of baby-proofing.

Willa began to close doors to rooms where she could see easily tippable furniture that was all-too-likely not screwed to the wall. She frowned when she saw that the stairway leading down to the basement, situated next to the kitchen and behind the living room, had no door, just steep stairs descending into the dark with no railing. “Do you still have the door that fits this frame?” she asked. “You should have that reinstalled pronto.”

“How should I know?” Daniel sounded irritable, but as Bobby looked up at him, offering one of his spare trains to play with, his frown turned to a reluctant smile. Looking down to meet Bobby's wide-eyed gaze, he ruffled the boy's hair. “Hey, thanks, buddy.” Bobby scurried off across the living room after his train. “He looks just like Robert.”

The sadness in his voice caught at Willa's heart, but she ignored it. As she continued to child-proof the house—which looked like it had been decorated in the seventies and had never been updated, considering the olive green and muted browns everywhere—Daniel followed her, Bobby trailing along curiously beside him. She wondered absently if Daniel reminded Bobby of his father. As brothers, there were enough similarities between Daniel and Robert to make it immediately clear that they were siblings. Shared angles in their faces. Eyes the same shade of blue. But where Robert had always had a bookish and friendly look about him, Daniel wore his looks with a ruggedness that only a cowboy could pull off. Willa found herself biting her lip as she glanced over at him, then flushed a mortifying shade of red. She might have left Texas behind, but the cowboy look had always been a favorite of hers... She shook her head, trying to clear it. *Good Lord, girl, get a hold of yourself.*



“Miss Markson, I can see that you care about this little cowpoke just as much as we do. How would we know about this child-proofing stuff the way you do? Two bachelors know as much about kids as a horse knows how to paint.”

Willa snorted under her breath, but then sighed as she moved cords from the floor to a nearby table. “New York is my home. I need to go back.”

Willa covered up a loose nail with a piece of sticky foam she’d discovered in one of the drawers in the kitchen in her wanderings and now found herself on the threshold of the biggest room of the house. It was clearly the master bedroom, and it smelled like leather. The bed was neatly made, the quilt faded but clearly stitched with skill. She saw jeans hanging in the closet—jeans upon jeans upon jeans—and she could bet that she’d find a few Stetsons and a number of cowboy boots in that closet, too.

“I can do my own bedroom,” rumbled Daniel behind her.

She jumped, her heart pounding. She turned to look at Daniel, who was now only a few feet from her. In the low light of the hallway, his dark blue eyes assessed her. She quickly tore her eyes away from his. With everything going on, she didn’t have time to moon over some grouchy cowboy!—no matter how handsome Daniel Gunn happened to be.

“Of course,” she stammered. “Just take care to move out of reach anything that might look enticing and dangerous from the perspective of a preschooler.” She took Bobby’s hand and led him back to the living room before he got any ideas about wreaking havoc in Daniel’s room.

“What’s his bedroom situation like?” she called over her shoulder.

“Got a bed,” Daniel called back. She started to move toward the hallway, but he stopped her with his next words. “But the frame’s still in the box. Cows got out just after I got the boxes home.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not the end of the world if he has to sleep on the mattress for a night or two. It’ll be fun!” she said

to Bobby, doing her best to get him excited about all the new changes. Judging by the look on his face, she wasn't doing a very good job.

Willa heard Daniel moving around in his bedroom, and once she'd helped contain Bobby's trains to one side of the living room, she noticed that Bobby had run right to those darn basement stairs to explore. She needed to block those off right now. Not only were the stairs themselves not safe, but she hadn't had a chance to assess what was down there for him to possibly get into. Directing Bobby back to the living room, she frowned, thinking. What could she use that would keep Bobby out?

Remembering the kitchen chairs and seeing a small coffee table in the living room, she decided she'd finagle something. She distracted Bobby with a few coloring books they'd brought with them before creating a wall of furniture: the chairs turned over, the table upside-down. It was a bit like a game of Tetris, but Willa smiled in triumph when Bobby only looked at the makeshift barrier and didn't try to get past it. "We're not going to go down there, okay?"

"Okay," he parroted.

Right then, the front door opened. "Hello?" a new masculine voice said.

Willa returned to the living room as a man who looked to be in his mid-sixties came inside.

He doffed his hat like some gentleman of old as he said, "You must be Miss Markson. I'm James Gunn, Daniel's uncle."

Willa held out her hand. "So nice to meet you. This is Bobby," she said as the boy ducked behind her legs again. "Bobby, this is your other uncle. Can you say hi?"

Bobby simply shook his head against the back of her leg, but Uncle James's kind face merely crinkled in a smile.

"No worries, miss. He doesn't know who I am, and I got such a wrinkled old face that I'm sure I'd scare any little bratches who looked at me."

Unlike Daniel, Uncle James made Willa feel instantly relaxed. It probably helped that he was old enough to be her father.

“What’s all the commotion in here?” said Daniel as he finally emerged from his bedroom.

Willa stiffened. *So much for feeling relaxed*, she thought.

## TWO

When Uncle James had told Daniel that Robert's nanny was bringing Bobby to them from New York, Daniel had expected the woman to be old and gray, as nannies were supposed to look.

But when Daniel had come outside to meet this Miss Markson, he'd realized that she wasn't old and gray.

As Uncle James introduced himself, Daniel took in Willa's appearance once again. She had a riot of black curls that were pulled back into a braid. A few tendrils had since escaped the plait and were curling about her face. She was fair-skinned, although Daniel could make out freckles on her nose and cheeks even from where he was standing. With her rosebud mouth and sparkling brown eyes, she was the definition of pretty.

The last thing he needed was a pretty woman hanging around and distracting him. Why couldn't she be some wrinkled spinster with a sharp tongue instead of this young beauty?

As Willa gestured to Bobby, Daniel saw that she'd painted her nails a ridiculously bright purple, the tips lavender. What kind of a woman took the time to paint her nails two different colors? Daniel had never met one, that was for sure.

Right then, Bobby started muttering quietly, too low for Daniel to understand, but Willa seemed to understand the child perfectly.

Kneeling next to the boy, she pointed to Daniel and said, "That's your Uncle Daniel, remember? And that's your Great-

uncle James. They're going to take care of you and love you so much."

Bobby stared at Daniel—it was like looking into Robert's eyes. Daniel's heart clenched. He and Robert had been estranged for years, and Daniel had never met his nephew. Now, he'd never get a chance to tell his brother that he was sorry, that the whole fight had been stupid. Pointless. Regret stabbed at Daniel at the same time as he vowed that he'd care for his brother's son as best he could. Bobby deserved nothing less.

Daniel wondered what to say to the child. His experience with young children was limited. He generally avoided them if he could. He found horses and dogs much easier to talk to.

Bobby stared up at him with a disconcertingly searching gaze. Then he pouted and turned his head into Willa's shoulder.

"It's been a long day for him," said Willa. "Normally he's very chatty. Aren't you, buddy? Here, go see your uncle."

And suddenly Willa was ushering Bobby toward Daniel, and even though Daniel almost told her not to, he bent down to get on his level. The boy stood before Daniel, seeming small for an almost four-year-old.

Bobby's eyes widened, and when his lower lip protruded, Daniel said the first words that came to mind. "It's okay, buddy. Nothing to be upset about."

For whatever reason, that only made Bobby's lip quiver, and then fat tears started rolling down his cheeks. This was followed by a full-fledged wail. Daniel winced. He'd never heard something so loud come from something so small.

The wail continued, and then Willa scooped the boy up and away from him with an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry," she said as she rubbed Bobby's back. "He might need a nap. He only takes them occasionally now, but it's been such a crazy day with all the traveling ..."

As Willa soothed Bobby and the child's tears turned into hiccups, Daniel finally noticed that his kitchen chairs were missing. What the hell? When he saw the missing furniture

upended in front of the basement stairs, irritation rose inside him.

Just because she was the nanny didn't give her the right to make changes in his own house! It wasn't decent. No, decent people asked first, especially when messing around with furniture that had belonged to his grandparents. Decent people didn't tromp all over your stomping grounds and move stuff around like they owned the place.

Daniel began to remove the furniture from in front of the stairs, grumbling the entire time as he did so.

"Oh, don't move those," said Willa as she came from the living room. "Unless you have that door somewhere, instead?" she added.

He just grunted. "Don't need a door. Didn't have one when I was a kid, and my parents did fine."

"This isn't fifty years ago," said Willa.

Daniel looked up with a scowl. He wasn't fifty years old, dammit. Not even close. He was thirty-five. Seeing Willa's sudden grin as his annoyance amused her, his body's response took him by surprise. He wasn't sure if he wanted to tell her off or kiss her.

*Definitely no kissing. She'd probably tell me how I was doing it wrong afterward.*

Wanting to change the subject, Daniel said to Uncle James, "I was telling Miss Markson that she can't leave right away. We need her to stay until Bobby is settled."

"You aren't staying?" Uncle James said in surprise, turning to Willa.

A guilty expression crossed her face even as her chin rose. "Unfortunately, I can't. As I was telling Daniel, I need to be back in New York. I have a very important job interview coming up."

"And that's more important than Bobby?" Even to Daniel's own ears, his voice was gruff, almost accusatory. Guilt pricked him when Willa turned a little pale. He hadn't meant it to



sound that harsh. Only he wanted to do right by his nephew, and shouldn't Bobby be everyone's first priority?

"What my nephew is trying to say is that we need your help," said Uncle James. "You can see it for yourself. Just a few days, Miss Markson. That's all we're asking."

Daniel saw Willa open her mouth and knew she was going to say no. He shot his uncle a look that said he wanted a moment alone with the woman, and Uncle James, after a moment's hesitation, stepped further into the living room to crouch down to play with Bobby, giving him and Willa some privacy.

"Miss Markson," said Daniel quietly. He'd left off putting away the furniture, no longer caring about restoring order—this woman was going to abandon him with a child he didn't know how to take care of.

She blinked up at him in obvious confusion. Now he was close enough to see that she had freckles on her forehead, too, despite her best efforts to cover them up. Damn shame, he thought. Freckles on a woman were as sexy as a bare shoulder or a pretty pair of legs, in his opinion.

"I'm a farmer, a cowboy," he explained, trying to find the right words to convince her. He wished right then he was one of those smooth talkers who could get people to do anything they wanted.

But all he could do right now was be honest. "I know about horses and corn and tractors. I can tell when the harvest is gonna be a good one and when it's gonna be a bad one because I feel it in my bones." He rubbed his jaw, stubble catching on his fingertips with a scratchy noise that made him put his hand down again.

He continued, "But I don't know anything about kids or how to raise one. Now that my brother is dead, Bobby is all I got left of him. I'll protect that little boy until my dying day; he's my blood, and he ain't got anyone else but me and Uncle James, here."

Willa's stubborn expression softened at his words, just as he'd hoped it would. He mentally shook his head at himself. Daniel

hated sharing his feelings like this, but he needed to convince this woman to stay. From her response, it looked like he might be able to talk her around. He hoped so, anyhow. He didn't know what he was going to do if he couldn't.

## THREE

Daniel could see the stubbornness in Willa's expression, and he was torn between being impressed at the starch in her spine and being frustrated that she was being so difficult. Most women, when he served them with one of his most heated looks, wilted into his arms.

Right now, he wished Willa would do more wilting, less hands-on-hips-glaring, as she was doing right now.

"I should finish setting up Bobby's room," the aggravating woman said now as she picked up a large bag before darting around Daniel like a minnow. Daniel followed her, telling himself he was not looking at her backside or enjoying how great it looked in those tight skinny jeans she was wearing.

"It's so bare," she surprised him by frowning as she took in Bobby's room.

Admittedly, there wasn't much in there except the essentials: a small mattress, the bed frame still in its box, a dresser, a bookshelf. Daniel hadn't known what else to get, if he was being honest. He'd thought he'd done a pretty good job. The room had all the essentials, didn't it, or would, once he got the last of it assembled?

"We didn't have a ton of time to get lots of things." Daniel tried not to sound defensive, but he failed. Did this woman expect a bachelor to have every piddling thing a child needed on hand?

She bit her lip. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just looking out for Bobby, you know. All of this change is hard

enough on an adult, let alone a little boy, and not having his things around him will just make everything more difficult, you know?” She smiled slightly, and he saw her eyes light up with some pleasant memory. “I know when I moved to my new apartment, it took me forever to get used to all the small changes from my old apartment.”

Daniel crossed his arms. “Routine is comforting,” he rumbled.

Her eyes brightened further. “Exactly.” She bent down and began to unpack the bag, pulling out toys, clothes, and other kid “things” that Daniel would have no idea how to use. Did kids these days need all this stuff? He knew his own parents hadn’t had any of this kind of thing when he and Robert had been young, and they’d grown up relatively normal.

“What is that thing?” He pointed at a small electronic box.

Willa laughed. “It’s a white noise machine. Don’t worry, I’ll show you how it works. And don’t look like that. It helps him sleep, I swear.”

White noise machines. Night lights. Pull-ups— “Isn’t he potty-trained?”

“Yes, actually. These are just for at night in case he wets the bed. Stacey was working on it with him, you know, developing a good night time routine, but then the accident happened ...”

Willa’s expression dimmed as she trailed off, a toy train in the palm of her hand. The reminder of the accident hit Daniel right in the gut, and it took a moment for him to regain his bearings.

Willa shook her head. “That’s something you get to figure out,” she added with a wry smile.

Daniel was close to getting on his knees to beg her to stay. Bed wetting? Night time routines?

He couldn’t. It wasn’t in his DNA. He was a bachelor, tried and true, and young’uns were anathema to his very existence. He understood horses, cows, farming, living on his own. Taking care of a small human being who literally depended on him to survive made no sense to him.

*You take care of your animals just fine*, his mind whispered, but he brushed the thought aside. Horses didn't need to be babysat every hour of every day. And they didn't need white noise machines, he thought wryly.

"This is Bobby's favorite book," said Willa. She held up a book with a bright-red dragon on the cover. "If you're not careful, he'll make you read it a hundred times in a row, but it usually puts him to sleep even when nothing else does."

Listening to Willa, Daniel heard for the first time a slight twang to her accent. He'd expected a New Yorker accent to come from her pretty mouth.

"Did you grow up in New York?" he asked.

It wasn't just his curiosity about her accent, he told himself, though that twang was intriguing. If he was going to try to get her to stay, he'd have to get to know her. Draw her out. Make her feel safe. It was what he did with a new horse—move slowly, talk quietly, and if all else failed, a little sugar for a bribe was the best remedy.

"No, I actually grew up not far from here." Aha!

Daniel felt his brows rise. "Really? I'm surprised I don't know you, or haven't heard of you."

"I left right after high school, and I wasn't the type of girl people would notice."

She didn't say the words with any bitterness, it seemed to Daniel, even as the thought—*I would've noticed you*—popped into his head. How could anyone not notice a woman as pretty as this one? If what she said was true, then the people in her hometown were both blind and stupid.

"I grew up in Macon, which is a stone's throw away from here, but I now say I'm from New York because that's where I've always felt most like myself," she explained as she continued to place colorful books that looked like they were made of stiff, shiny cardboard on the small bookshelf. "And I've been there for so long now that coming back here feels strange. It's like a foreign country."

"Texas is like that," he drawled.

She smiled before shaking her head. “There was a reason why I left. I’m not a Texas kind of girl.”

“What kind of girl is that?” He tilted his head back, curious.

“You know—big hair, big boobs. Wears cowboy boots and marries a cowboy right out of college. The kind of girl guys like you would marry,” she added with a sly smile.

Daniel didn’t know whether to be affronted or pleased at her statement. “How do you know what kind of girl I’d want to marry?” He smirked before giving her a very obvious up and down look. “I think you could pull off big hair.” He neglected to say anything about her “big boobs” comment, but she wasn’t exactly lacking in that department either.

He was only teasing, but he saw Willa blush all the same, and he wondered if his look had gotten her thinking about him just like he was thinking about her.

She rolled her eyes at him. “You know what I mean.”

He brought her back to her earlier point. “So, you didn’t want to be a ‘Texas girl.’”

She lifted her chin. “No, I didn’t. I wanted to study art.” This surprised him. People actually studied art—seriously? “And that wasn’t a thing in my hometown.” No kidding. But she was still speaking, and he nodded to show he was listening. “I was strange to everyone, like an alien. I thought I *was* an alien until I went to New York and found people who were like me.”

He tilted his head slightly and asked, “So now you have tons of artist friends?”

When Willa hesitated, Daniel realized that despite finding a place that fit her, she’d neglected to make a lot of friends. He understood that all too well. Sometimes it was easier to keep to yourself than put yourself out there. He’d been doing that for years, now. He lived his life, and he was content with it. If he admitted he was lonely, well, that was his own fault, wasn’t it?

“I have friends, but I’m also really busy,” she said at last.



“Helping with Bobby?” He didn’t know why he was suddenly so damn curious about her. Normally he preferred to keep his nose out of other people’s business, but there was something about this woman that intrigued him.

“That, yes, but also working on getting my dream job. I love your nephew, but being an au pair is hardly my life’s ambition or my dream gig.”

What would someone who’d chosen to study art, of all things, consider to be the gravy on her potatoes? Adopting her own words, he asked, “What *is* your dream gig?”

“I think being able to make a living on your art is the goal for any artist. If I work my way up from a gallery job and make the right connections, I might be able to do that one day.” She shrugged. “Which is why I need to get back for my interview.” Oh no, they were back to singing that song. “I know the timing is bad, and I wish things were otherwise, but ...”

Daniel stared at her for a long moment, wondering how he could convince her to stay. Beg? Bribe? Should he give her a sugar cube like he’d done with the tetchy mare he’d bought last week? What would be the equivalent of a sugar cube to Willa Markson?

“I get that this interview you mentioned is important to you,” he said, feeling his way, “and that you have a life back in New York. I’m not asking you to give all of that up. That’s not fair to you.” Grasping at something she’d said earlier, he added, “But didn’t you just say that routine is important to little kids?”

He saw her expression soften at his words, and hope sprung up inside him. “I’m not saying *stay forever*, Ms. Markson.” He used the most coaxing tone he could muster. “Just please don’t run off until Bobby is situated. He’s been through so much already, and he likes you far more than he likes me right now.”

*And maybe, unlike in New York, you can make some friends here.*

Willa sighed. “I do love Bobby. He’s important to me. I hope you don’t think otherwise.” She blew out a breath, brushing a

stray curl from her forehead. “Okay, Mr. Gunn. I’ll stay for a few days. I can make it work.”

Daniel couldn’t help but smile in relief. He hadn’t been at all certain he could convince her to stay. But what would two bachelors do with a child? Poor Bobby deserved better than himself and Uncle James bumbling around like a bunch of idiots with no grain in the silo. Hopefully, Willa would stay long enough to teach them how to take care of Bobby, to understand the nuances of parenting that Daniel couldn’t even begin to contemplate.

“Call me Daniel,” he said, smiling widely. “Mr. Gunn is an old man’s name, and despite what you might think, I’m not *that* old yet.”

She smiled and laughed a little, and that smile went straight to his groin. She was radiant when she smiled. He wished he hadn’t noticed that fact.

“Well then, you should call me Willa,” she said with a slight chuckle.

They shook on it, and if it seemed to Daniel that she’d let her fingers graze his palm a second longer than necessary, he told himself he’d just imagined it.

## FOUR

Willa had planned on staying at the local bed and breakfast, but Bobby had gotten teary-eyed and began whimpering as soon as she'd stepped outside Daniel's house to get something from the car, and she'd realized she couldn't leave the boy so soon.

It wasn't because she wanted to spend more time with the grumpy yet handsome cowboy. No, sirree.

If not for their conversation early on, Willa wouldn't have known how to broach the subject with Daniel. Inviting yourself to stay at someone's house was the height of rudeness. Luckily, Daniel had brought up the issue himself when he'd mentioned the guest room earlier. Too bad she'd been so emphatic in her refusal. She was going to have to eat her words now.

She took a deep breath before speaking. Uncle James had already gone home, leaving Willa and Daniel to shift for themselves.

"I had planned to stay over at the bed and breakfast in town, but now ..." Willa sat down next to Bobby on the living room floor and ruffled his hair. "I'm not sure that's the best idea."

She heard Daniel let out an audible sigh of relief, and then he said, "Thank the lord. I was worried I was going to have to beg you to stay at the house."

Willa looked at him in surprise, and she was shocked to see a small smile on his face. Was he ... flirting with her? She blushed to the roots of her hair.

*Don't be stupid, she scolded herself. He just doesn't want to deal with an upset child all night if he can help it.*

Bobby, unsettled by having to go to bed in an unfamiliar place, whined grumpily when Willa tried to coax him to lay down for an afternoon nap, insisting he wasn't sleepy.

"It's not a nap," she said. "I know you've said you're too big for naps now. It's just a rest. Even grown-ups take rests."

Standing in the hallway with Daniel, listening to the boy's sniffles, Willa ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. "Somehow, I don't think the guest room is going to work. At least, not for the first night."

To her relief, Daniel agreed. After a short, fitful nap, Bobby was awake again. Daniel cooked them a dinner of steak and baked potatoes, then quickly put the small bed frame together and made up a cot for Willa in Bobby's room. While Daniel took care of cleaning up the kitchen, Willa helped Bobby with a bath and then put the boy to bed. The little guy was so tired he fell asleep without much resistance.

Although Willa was grateful for that, it meant the only other person awake in the house was Daniel. When she passed him in the hallway, he looked more relaxed, the top couple buttons of his shirt undone, a few locks of his sandy hair straying across his forehead.

He slowed as he approached her, and she could tell he meant to say something. His gaze felt heated, his dark blue eyes pinning her to the spot.

"If you need anything tonight, you know where to find me," he said.

Willa's eyes darted down the hall to his bedroom, and her mind jumped straight to a vision of Daniel in bed. Her entire body flushed at the thought. Lordy, what was wrong with her? Embarrassed, she managed to nod and mutter "Goodnight" before fleeing to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She didn't leave the bathroom again until she heard Daniel's bedroom door shut. She just prayed she didn't run into him while she was wearing her pajamas. That thought

alone sent her scurrying back to Bobby's room and shutting the door.

The following morning after breakfast, Daniel informed her that a few people would be stopping by to meet Bobby. "A few people" turned into basically everyone in town showing up to see Robert Gunn's little son, like he was some kind of holy relic they'd all crossed deserts to see.

"Oh, he's the spittin' image of his daddy," said a woman whose name Willa couldn't remember. She was older, her accent classic Texan, and she'd brought over a casserole. The kitchen was filled with the things, and Willa didn't think even a big man like Daniel could eat them all on his own. Not anytime soon, at least.

Bobby was currently engrossed with playing with his trucks. The woman knelt down to touch Bobby's head, making Bobby start in surprise. His blue eyes widened dangerously.

Bobby was usually calm, if shy, with strangers, but he wasn't used to being around so many at once. Willa had told Daniel after the third visitor that enough was enough, but they kept coming in droves, food in hand, bright smiles and sad eyes and loud voices exclaiming over Bobby.

Willa herself had gotten a few remarks. When she'd said "New York," they'd left her alone, however. Texans like these didn't know what to say to a city girl like her.

Bobby let out a sound that was close to a cry as the woman stood up again, her expression concerned.

"I'm sorry," Willa said, opening her arms and letting Bobby scurry into her lap. "It's been a long day."

"Don't apologize, sugar. Kids are always loose cannons." The woman turned to Daniel, who had been standing nearby, overseeing the proceedings like some silent ruler. "It must be a comfort to you to have your brother's boy with you now. He's the last bit of family you have left, besides your uncle."

Daniel's eyes creased. "A comfort, yes," he rumbled.

To Willa's ears, it sounded like the opposite. *A plague. Or, an annoyance.*

Willa believed that Daniel Gunn had good intentions and wanted to care for his nephew as best he could, but what if his best wasn't good enough? She sighed inwardly, because at the end of the day, she was, in fact, nobody. She wasn't Bobby's family. She was just the hired help. Not to mention, she had to get back to New York.

"I want my trucks," said Bobby. He started to reach down, and Willa let him go. He pushed the trucks across the rug, making zoom-zoom noises. When she took a truck and rolled it up his back, he squirmed and burst into giggles that warmed her heart.

Her phone chirped with a text. When she saw that it was her dad texting her, she sighed and decided to ignore it.

And then another text came. And another. She was about to put her phone on silent when she read the last text and grimaced. *I know you're ignoring me.*

She *was* ignoring her dad because ever since he'd found out she was back in Texas, he'd been determined to get her to stay. He'd been calling her, texting her, and bugging the hell out of her since she'd landed.

Charles Markson had been a strict parent, a classic Texas cowboy with a heart of gold but an inability to talk about anything that rendered him vulnerable. It hadn't helped that Willa's mother, Annabelle, had died of breast cancer when Willa was barely six. Annabelle had been the only one to make Charles's eyes soften, or his voice go gentle.

But after Annabelle's death, Charles had kept Willa close. Not only had he wanted her to be the son he'd never had, he'd wanted her to grow up to be a tried and true Texan, and to embrace her roots as much as he did.

Except Willa had only disappointed her dad.

She'd wanted to study art. He'd wanted her to take over the family farm. When she'd fled to New York, Willa had known it had broken her dad's heart.

Her phone started ringing. She grabbed it and said to Daniel, "Sorry, I need to take this. Can you watch him?"

He raised a sardonic eyebrow as if to say, *he's my nephew, ain't he?*

"Daddy, what is it?" she said as soon as she was around the side of the house, away from the guests who were still coming and going.

"That's all you have to say to me? 'What is it?'" Her dad's voice boomed in her ear. "Is that something city folk up north say to their folks after months of not talking to them?"

She winced. "It hasn't been that long."

"Three months, Willa Marie." She hated when he used her middle name that way. "Three. Months. I could've been dead these three long months and you woulda never known, being up there in New York with your art and your trains and your *lattes*—" As if lattes were a bad word, somehow?

She forced herself to speak pleasantly. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I've just been busy."

Her dad huffed, not remotely mollified. "Too busy for your dear ole dad, huh?" She could just see him shaking his head in her mind's eye as his voice grated in her ear, "I see how it is."

She didn't have time for this conversation, even if her dad was right. She *had* been ignoring him. And now she was whispering into her phone, because she didn't want people around here to know she still had family in Texas. That would be akin to admitting she had a husband and children she'd abandoned to go north, as it would make no sense to them for her to forsake the family she'd left behind in the only worthwhile state in the entire union.

"Look, Dad, I'm only here for a little bit. For Bobby. I'm getting him situated, and then I'm going back to New York. Like I told you."

"Why go back? What do you have there? Not even a job now. The boy's parents are gone."

Willa hissed in a breath. "Daddy! Don't be like that."

"I'm sorry," he said and added, "May God rest their souls." He wasn't done. "But you know as well as I do that you've been

frittering away your time up there. Babysitting somebody's kid, and for what? You can babysit kids here in Macon and actually afford an apartment on that money, too."

Willa heard the front door open, and she hoped that Bobby wouldn't freak out at the next guest's appearance. Daniel would have a heart attack. Then again, the thought of seeing the handsome cowboy flustered by a boy who barely reached his waist made her smile in amusement. Men were so big and strong—until you made them take care of a child.

"I actually have a job interview for a very prestigious art gallery," she said. She hadn't intended to tell her dad about the interview unless she got the job, but she needed leverage.

"That ain't a real job. You know that. A real job is where you get your hands dirty, where you work the land—"

Her ears pricked when she heard Bobby's voice, high-pitched and whiny, coming from the house. "Daddy, I gotta go. I'll call you later, okay? When I'm back in New York."

She hung up, almost glad for Bobby's interruption, and shoved her phone in her pocket before her dad could scold her further. She didn't want to hear about what he considered a real job. Like everyone else around her growing up, she knew her dad would never understand her love of art. She'd never been able to convey that feeling of utter joy to him. The one she got whenever she held a paintbrush in her hand or when she walked into a new gallery for the first time. Willa and her dad were beans and onions—both vegetables, but also two crops that should never be grown side by side. One would always hinder the growth of the other.

Rushing inside, she winced as Bobby's whining grew louder. The little boy's face was bright red, and he seemed on the verge of a full-fledged tantrum.

Daniel had picked him up and was trying to soothe him, but Bobby kept trying to wrench himself away from this man who was little more than a stranger. An older man sat on the sofa, drinking sweet tea and studiously avoiding looking at Daniel trying to keep his nephew from melting down.



“I’m sorry, I’ll take him,” Willa said, coming up to them. Bobby’s screams didn’t stop as he thrust his arms desperately in her direction.

Daniel handed her the child as if Bobby was a live grenade about to go off. “Thank Christ,” he muttered.

Willa lifted the boy onto her hip so that they were staring eye to eye, to reassure him she was the one holding him now, and his fussing waned slightly, though it didn’t stop. She pulled him against her chest, then, letting him bury his wet face in her neck, and murmured, “Come on, buddy, let’s go take a rest.”

She rubbed his back in small circles as she took him to his room. Bobby cried harder when she laid him down on his bed, but after she’d rubbed his back a bit longer, soothing him in a quiet voice, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Willa breathed a sigh of relief. He was fussier than he usually was, though Willa assumed that was his way of dealing with the loss of his parents. Death was hardly something the boy could wrap his head around, but he could feel the absence of Stacey and Robert. Feel the change that came with living at his Uncle Daniel’s. Even if he couldn’t quite put it into words, Bobby was grieving. And that grief, combined with the revolving door of people who had come by the house today, had exhausted him.

Returning to the living room, she heard Daniel saying, “She’s from Texas, actually. She just lives in New York. Yeah, has family here, too.”

She stilled, listening, wondering who Daniel was talking about, only to hear the man on the sofa say, “Oh, really? Well, that changes everything. I knew you couldn’t trust somebody up north to know how to take care of a kid.”

Willa scowled. She hadn’t told Daniel that she had family here in Texas still, and what was he doing going around telling people she was *from* here? She *wasn’t* from here. She’d told him as much herself.

She remembered hearing the front door open when she’d been on the phone. Had Daniel overheard her talking to her dad? He

hadn't had any right to eavesdrop on her conversations!

She came into the living room and glared at Daniel.

Seeing her expression, Daniel didn't react, except to raise a single brow in question.

She could confront him, tell him he was wrong, but then she'd just look like a crazy person. Gritting her teeth, she pasted on a smile and let herself be introduced to the man on the sofa, knowing he'd tell the whole town that Willa was from Texas and that her daddy lived here just as soon as he left the farm.

## FIVE

It was a beautiful summer day—the sky bright blue, the breeze blowing—and Willa had practically shoved Bobby toward Daniel after breakfast. “Time to get to know your nephew,” she’d said with a bright smile. “No time like the present! I’ve got a few things I need to take care of, calls to make, you know.” Of course. He was going to have to jump in the watering hole and swim some time or other.

Daniel decided he’d take Bobby along to show him what he did for a living. The little cowpoke wasn’t quite old enough to understand everything, but it was important that Bobby come to know where his own daddy came from.

Willa had shown Daniel and Uncle James enough of how to care for Bobby—bedtime routine, bath time, toys, books, food, so much information it made Daniel’s head spin—that Daniel had felt confident she didn’t need to spend the entire day with them today.

Daniel had even found the little cowboy hat that had been Robert’s and had settled it on Bobby’s head.

Now Bobby kept taking the hat off to inspect it as they walked to the edge of the nearest field. When Bobby dropped the hat in the dirt, Daniel picked it up, trying not to get annoyed with his nephew. He was only three-and-a-half. He didn’t know that this hat was important.

“Now Bobby, you see those trees out there? That’s the edge of this property. Your daddy and I would climb those trees when we were hardly older than you. We’d play in the creek, too,

fishing for crawdads and taking 'em home to eat that night. Your grandma would fry them up something special.”

“Crawdad,” repeated Bobby. A cow mooed nearby, and he looked over with interest. “Cows are stinky.”

“That’s definitely true, son. They aren’t known for smelling pretty.”

They didn’t smell pretty, the way Willa did; she smelled like roses. Daniel didn’t know what kind of fancy soap or perfume she used, but every time she was near, he inhaled that scent, and he wanted to get closer to her. He wanted to bury his nose in her dark curly hair, feel the silken tendrils, wrap them around his hand—

*Stop that, he told himself. Stop daydreaming about the damn babysitter.*

He checked his watch. Normally, he’d already be done with fixing these irrigation pipes, but with Bobby, his usual schedule had gone to hell in a handbasket.

“Come on, let’s get a’movin’. We got chores to do.”

He checked the area for fire ants, scorpions, and snakes before letting Bobby run loose, conveniently near but not underfoot. Bobby played in the grass as Daniel worked, content to rip up the grass and laugh at grasshoppers darting around him. Daniel placed the cowboy hat on Bobby’s head, but the boy just frowned and tore the hat off his head with a grimace.

“No, thank you,” said Bobby. “I don’t want it.”

A woman laughed, and Daniel looked up to see Willa walking toward them. “At least he was polite about it,” she said with a bright smile. “Manners are important.”

“They sure are,” he said wryly.

“Nooooo,” repeated Bobby as he tossed the hat away.

Daniel frowned as he picked up the offending piece of headgear, wiping off the dirt with his sleeve.

Willa grimaced. “I’m sorry. That’s a real Stetson, isn’t it? I’d recognize it anywhere.” She took the hat and crouched in front

of Bobby. “You need to keep the sun off your head, buddy. Why don’t you keep this on? For me? And for your Uncle Daniel?” She placed the hat on Bobby’s head.

Instead of flinging it off, the boy squinted up at the brim as if he were considering obeying. Then, three seconds later, he tore the hat off with an annoyed cry. “Don’t want it! No!” Bobby’s face turned bright red as he slapped his hands against the ground.

Daniel braced himself for a tantrum, but luckily, a grasshopper flew by and effectively distracted Bobby for the time being.

“Yeah, this isn’t going to happen today. We’ll try again some other time.” Willa glanced around the field. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“I’m fixing some pipes.” Daniel glanced at his watch again. “I’m totally running behind on doing it. I know you said you had some things to do, calls to make, but can you watch him now that you’re here?” To his relief, she nodded with an easy smile. Maybe her calls had gone well. He didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

So much for teaching Bobby how the farm worked, Daniel thought as he worked in the ditch, patching a pipe that had been leaking lately. As he worked, he watched Willa and Bobby from the corner of his eye. Willa pulled out a tube of what looked like sunscreen, and she rubbed it all over Bobby until he started to protest.

Of course, sunscreen. Why hadn’t Daniel thought of that? That boy’s skin was whiter than Willa’s, and she was pretty fair skinned. Bobby would burn to a crisp in this hot Texas sun. But Daniel, who was the color of a horse’s saddle, hadn’t worn sunscreen since he’d been Bobby’s age, if ever.

*I need to start thinking about people other than myself*, he told himself as he worked, sweat dripping down his forehead as the day got hotter. It wasn’t even midday, and it was already sweltering.

Most people hated the Texas heat, but not Daniel. He loved it. He loved how the sun beat down on his head, how the heat

shimmered across the horizon. How there was nothing bluer than a summer sky in the heart of Texas, and nothing more satisfying than taking care of this land that was in his blood.

When he finished working, he looked up to see Willa standing with Bobby holding her hand, her other hand shading her eyes. She nodded when their gazes met and said, “We’re going inside. It’s too hot out here. Will you be done soon? Because I have to go and get some more work done.”

Daniel wanted to ask if the work had anything to do with the interview in New York. He knew there were likely things she had to do to prepare, but he was already way off schedule. Working with a preschooler underfoot was much harder than he’d anticipated. He still needed to take care of the animals, and they’d already been waiting for too long. “I need you to stay a little longer. I’d planned to keep Bobby with me, but you’re right, it’s too hot, and he’s not used to this kind of weather,” he said.

“I can’t manage more than half an hour.” At Daniel’s scowl, she lifted her chin. “Remember, I came to bring you Bobby, not to be your babysitter.”

She was right, dammit, and Daniel had nothing to say to that. “One hour?” he asked. At her protest, he added, “Please. Just this once.”

Willa sighed, but he saw her nod, and then she picked up Bobby’s hat and made her way across the field and into the house. Daniel hurried through cleaning the stables and feeding his horses, prior to turning them out to graze, surly that his usual schedule was thrown off course so easily. How the hell was he going to take care of this farm *and* a little boy? He’d stupidly thought Bobby could just fit into his schedule, as if the little boy were a new cow. Or something.

As he reached her stall, his favorite mare Magnolia was waiting for him, vigorously nodding her head and whickering in greeting. She pushed her face against his chest, campaigning for the pieces of carrot that he invariably carried in a pocket. Daniel snorted as he patted her silky nose. “I’m an idiot, aren’t I?”

Magnolia nodded again, making Daniel laugh.

It was to be his last laugh for a while. By the time Daniel came back to the farmhouse, Willa was madder than a wet hen.

“It’s been almost three hours! You said one!” she hissed. “I’m not an employee you can order around, Mr. Gunn! You didn’t hire me—I’m here as a *favor*, for Bobby’s sake, and to honor Robert and Stacey’s memory. I am *not* here to take over for you as guardian and allow you to dodge your responsibilities to your nephew.”

He needed a drink of water. Maybe something stronger. He ran his hand over the back of his head. “Sorry. Things took longer than expected.”

Willa looked about ready to explode. “I’ll say.”

“I said I was sorry. What more do you want?”

“What do I want? I *need* to get work done, like I told you.”

“You can do it now. I’m back. I can keep an eye on Bobby.”

An angry flush climbed up her cheeks. “I needed to have sent it in hours ago!” She pushed her fingers through her hair, which only made her breasts rise. Daniel found he had to look away from the temptation she offered.

“I have work, too. No reason to get upset about it,” he said. He forced himself to stop staring at Willa—and her breasts, if he were being honest—and stared over at the sampler on the wall his grandmother had stitched long before Daniel had been born. Maybe if he thought about his grandma and how she’d always threatened to spank him with a wooden spoon when he was a kid, he’d stop thinking these thoughts about Willa.

“I’m not upset,” she snapped.

He tried not to smile as he looked back to her again. “Sure you aren’t, darlin’.”

Willa growled low in her throat as she grabbed her purse to head into town, to get some work done at the public library, as she’d told him over breakfast. “Bobby is napping, so you’re welcome. I’m leaving. I’m not coming back to babysit today at

all, got it?” She paused and said lower, “I love Bobby, but he’s not *my* nephew, you know?”

Daniel did know. “Sorry I was so late. It won’t happen again.”

“Thank you.”

She looked up at him under her dark lashes, which made him want to kiss her. Irritated, he said, “See you later.”

She raised her eyebrows at his gruff tone, but he didn’t care if he’d offended her for the thousandth time. The last thing he needed was to be sweet on a girl who had no intention of sticking around.



## SIX

What had initially been just a few days turned into a week, and Willa was itching to get the hell out of Dodge.

It wasn't that anyone was unkind to her—it was the opposite. They were overly attentive to her and to Bobby. Once Daniel had told everyone of her father living in nearby Macon and her Texas roots, it was like she was the prodigal daughter come home. Everyone seemed to want her to stay, as if she'd been waiting for the invitation.

*You can't leave that little boy just yet. I know Daniel would love to have you help out, too.*

*There ain't nothing in New York you can't get here!*

Except Willa couldn't get her favorite Thai dish here, or get any food that wasn't a variation of steak and potatoes. The produce consisted of corn, tomatoes, and more corn—no kale, no crispy purple cabbage, no coconut aminos or sweet, tart starfruit.

When she'd tried to make Bobby one of his favorite meals—aloo gobi, an Indian dish with curry, potatoes, and cauliflower—Willa hadn't been able to find one jar of curry powder in the whole damn town. And garam masala? Forget about it. She'd asked one of the clerks if they had any of those spices, and he'd goggled at her like she'd asked if they sold bags of cocaine.

Now Willa was standing in one of the few restaurants in town and wishing she could pack her bags right then. Jack's Diner was one of the hottest places in the area, in that it had the best

burgers and shakes for miles. The owner, Sarah Nevarez, was a middle-aged woman with a long, gray braid down her back. She was also loud and welcoming, making sure everyone was having a good time.

“So, you’re the infamous Willa Markson!” said Sarah, shaking Willa’s hand vigorously. “I’ve heard all about you. You’re prettier than a picture. Ain’t she pretty, Larry?”

Larry, the diner’s cook, grunted and headed back into the kitchen.

“That means he likes you,” said Sarah with a grin. “I can’t believe you’ve been here a week and I haven’t met you until now. Where’ve you been hiding all this time? You have a room down at the bed and breakfast, right?”

Willa smiled awkwardly. “Mr. Gunn’s been letting me use his guest room while Bobby settles in. I’m not staying much longer—”

Sarah shot her an incredulous look. “Oh, you can’t leave! You just got here! Now, Danny boy put together this little shindig for you, and I want you to enjoy yourself this evening. Eat as much as you like.” She eyed the younger woman. “Goodness, but you’re skinny. Don’t they feed you up north?” Sarah shook her head. “Of course they don’t. Nothing but salad and smog, I reckon.”

Considering that Willa was hardly a size zero, she almost laughed at Sarah’s pronouncement that she was too skinny. Her jeans and her bra size would beg to differ.

When Daniel had told her he’d asked Sarah to throw a welcome party for Bobby and Willa, Willa had tried to get out of it. But Daniel had that implacable gleam in his eye that she’d realized nobody could say no to. Besides, what harm would it be to meet some people? Hadn’t she met most of them already at Daniel’s house?

People streamed into the diner in what seemed like droves. Willa found herself the center of attention, people asking her all sorts of questions while giving her unsolicited advice. They

shoved plates of food into her hand, admonishing her tiny appetite.

Willa didn't mind talking to strangers; growing up in Texas, you got used to talking to everybody and anybody. But it was a weird sensation, having all these people acting like she was some kind of hometown celebrity. She wished she could sneak away to be alone for a moment. This kind of thing was hell on earth for an introvert like her.

Over at one of the tables, Daniel and Uncle James were looking after Bobby. Willa stood on tiptoe to see what they were up to, and she sighed in relief to see that Bobby seemed occupied.

Daniel looked up in that moment and caught her staring. He grinned. She looked away, blushing. She'd promised she'd take the night off from looking after Bobby, but old habits die hard.

Or maybe it was because Daniel, despite his annoying love of strict schedules, his insistence on her staying longer than she'd wanted, and his overall stubborn cowboy personality, made her heart flutter every time he caught her looking. Everyone around her seemed to be engaged in conversations with each other, and she was alone for a blessed moment. Her heart beat faster when she saw Daniel smile down at Bobby. Tonight, Daniel had even changed into black jeans instead of his usual blue denim, his cotton button-up shirt hugging his muscular arms and chest.

What right did such an annoying man have to be so handsome?

"How does that song go?" said Sarah as she stood next to Willa again, eating a piece of pie. "'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to'?"

Willa's brow crinkled. "Who's crying?"

"Nobody, but you look like you might. Or you might kick somebody. I've seen that look too many times to count on people's faces when they come in here with some burden or

other.” Sarah dug her fork into the peach pie on her plate. “So, what’s up with you, sugar?”

“Nothing’s up with me,” she said rather unconvincingly.

“Oh, come on. No reason to lie. You have a face that makes everything obvious.”

Willa blushed and then blushed harder at the implication. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I hope those two Gunn men aren’t making your life hell. I’ve known both of them for years.” Sarah dropped her voice to a confidential tone that still carried over the noise in the crowded restaurant. “James Gunn was born crotchety. When we were in high school together, he got mad when our class played a prank on the freshmen and put frogs in their lockers.” Sarah grinned and her eyes lit with mischief. “He acted like we’d tried to murder somebody when he found out about it. Then again, he was class president and had an image to maintain.”

Willa was completely lost, so she just nodded and decided that Sarah was the type of person who could talk for hours without anyone else having to say much in reply.

“And Danny? Cut from the same cloth! He’s a hard worker, of course, but stubborn as a mule.” Sarah snorted at whatever memory came to her mind. “Why, when he was a kid no bigger than that little nephew of his is now, he came into my diner and told me that he didn’t need his momma’s help at all cutting up his meat during dinner. ‘I’ll do it myself’ was his motto.”

Sarah cut Willa a sly glance. “What I’m sayin’ is, those two men have a way about them that tends to make you do what they want you to do. But I can see that you’re stubborn, too.” She gave Willa’s ribs a nudge with her elbow. “Give ‘em hell, and they’ll back off.”

Willa knew all about stubborn cowboys, considering her daddy was one. She was about to tell Sarah as much when Bobby knocked one of his toys onto the floor. It was only a second later that he started fighting to get out of the booth.

Daniel caught him by the arm, but Bobby wrenched away in protest. Daniel had to let go, probably so Bobby wouldn't hurt himself.

Bobby ran straight for Willa, launching himself at her and gripping her waist as he cried. "I don't wanna go back! Don't wanna!" he kept repeating.

"Goodness, what's this about?" Willa crouched down in front of Bobby. "You're okay, buddy. You don't have to go anywhere."

Bobby sniffled. Stroking his hair, Willa saw Daniel say something to Uncle James before sitting back down. Had Daniel wanted to take Bobby home, and the little guy had protested? Willa sighed.

Bobby was still clinging to her, no matter how much time she tried to spend apart from him. Every time she left the farmhouse and came back again, he'd make a beeline for her as soon as she walked in the door. She could tell Daniel was frustrated by it, and a part of her was, too. If Bobby wasn't adjusting yet, how could she in good conscience leave him? Would that just traumatize him further?

"Well, I don't see how you can leave any time soon," said Sarah, as if echoing Willa's thoughts. "This little boy loves you. Don't you, son?" She ruffled Bobby's dark hair with a wide smile.

Daniel got up after Sarah left to go talk to other guests, making his way toward Willa.

"I know I told you you'd get the evening off, but this little guy had other plans," he said with an apologetic smile.

"Kids tend to do that."

They gazed at each other, and Willa found herself staring at the notch of brown skin revealed by his unbuttoned collar. What would it be like to kiss him there? Feel his heart beat under her lips? What would he taste like?

She blushed scarlet, but Bobby was tugging on her pant leg the way he did to signal he had to use the bathroom. "I think he needs to go. Be right back."

Bobby took her hand, and she led him into the ladies' room. Letting Daniel Gunn get under her skin like that? That would be worse than staying in Texas for good.

But looking down at her charge, she knew she couldn't leave. Not yet. She'd talk to the art gallery owner about her situation and hope she could do some parts of the interview process remotely. Or perhaps he'd postpone it entirely.

"What am I gonna do?" she asked Bobby. "You have any advice?"

"We could play trains!" was his answer, which made her laugh so much that she gave him a smacking kiss and told him he was the smartest little boy in the whole wide world.

## SEVEN

Daniel was no stranger to hard work. His parents had died when he was eighteen, leaving him to raise his younger brother all by himself along with taking care of the farm, his parents' legacy. He'd transformed from an immature kid into an adult the day his parents were hit by a drunk driver on a run into town.

His number-one task at the moment was to give his nephew the best possible care. To do that, he needed Willa Markson here—and not in New York—to help him. Daniel was proud, but he wasn't stupid. He knew he couldn't care for his nephew without Willa's help, not to mention the fact that Bobby was extremely attached to Willa. Separating Bobby from Willa after the boy had already lost his parents would be traumatic, something Daniel wanted to avoid at all costs.

Now Daniel sat with his Uncle James at Jack's Diner, drinking beer and going over Robert's estate. Daniel had yet to mention that he'd wanted to discuss a way to keep Willa around for a while longer.

"Everything looks good," said Uncle James as he pushed another form toward Daniel to sign. "Your brother might not have been great with money, but he left things in good standing. Even had a will, life insurance, everything young people today don't appear to think about because they think they'll live forever." Uncle James snorted, ruffling his mustache.

Daniel signed the form with a heavy heart. He wished he could tell his brother he was sorry for not being the kind of brother

Robert had needed. While Daniel had found solace in strict rules, especially when he'd had to raise Robert by his lonesome, what Robert had needed was a brother, someone to lean on, to talk about his problems with. But Daniel had been too preoccupied with keeping the farm running and putting food on the table to notice the inner turmoil haunting Robert after their parents had died.

Daniel had been thankful when Robert had met Stacey. By the time Robert and Stacey had gotten married, Daniel hadn't seen Robert for over three years. Their only contact had been the occasional phone call, and even those had stopped after what turned out to be their last argument. Daniel had only met Stacey once, and that had been at the wedding. He wished he hadn't been so focused on himself and had gotten to know his sister-in-law better.

Uncle James drank his beer silently, but Daniel could feel the older man's gaze on him. Only Uncle James knew how much Daniel regretted not mending his relationship with Robert before he had died.

"How's the little britches doing?" said Uncle James. "And the little lady, too?"

Daniel's mouth twisted into a semblance of a smile. "Bobby is doing as well as he can, I think." He sighed deeply. "But God Almighty, I don't know anything about children!"

Uncle James snorted. "I could'a' told you that."

"I want to do right by Bobby, but I know I can't just shove him into my life and hope for the best." If he couldn't get Bobby to adjust, he'd feel like he'd failed Robert for a second time—first when he shut him out, and now again by not being the guardian Bobby needed. This was his last chance to make amends to his brother.

Uncle James's gaze burned holes in Daniel's shirt. "So what are you saying?"

Daniel let out a breath. "I'm saying that I need to figure out how to make Willa want to stay here, that's what. She's the



person Bobby knows and loves best. She can't leave him in the dust." *She can't leave me in the dust.*

Uncle James nodded slowly. "I ain't disagreeing, but Miss Markson has her own life, son. She seemed mighty set on getting back to New York as soon as she could. I bet she's just itching to get out of here."

For whatever reason, the words stung Daniel. Maybe it was because he was so attached to Texas and the way of life here that he'd never understood why first Robert, and now Willa, wanted to run away like bats out of hell. What was so bad about small-town Texas? It seemed like a nicer place than any big city could possibly be.

"I think if we aren't careful, Miss Markson will sneak out in the middle of the night and never come back," he answered dryly.

"Then you have to give her a reason to stay." Uncle James smiled as he added, "She's single, ain't she?"

Daniel clenched his fists, feeling the hairs rise on the back of his neck. "What's that got to do with Bobby?"

"Nothin'. Everythin'. A pretty woman like her should have a man at her side. Why not you?" Uncle James's look turned sly. "I saw the way you look at her when you think nobody notices."

Daniel managed to keep himself from pulling at his collar. Barely. He felt all of ten years old again. "She wouldn't be interested in me."

"Did you ask her?"

"No, and I'm not going to. Come up with another reason. One that won't get me slapped."

Uncle James didn't look convinced, but Daniel let out a relieved breath when his uncle turned away and didn't say anything more about the subject.

The corners of Daniel's mouth lifted, thinking of being close enough to Willa to get slapped. While he couldn't help thinking about how Willa's smile made him want to kiss her,

even an angry Willa was something else, her eyes snapping and color rushing to her cheeks. It would almost be worth getting slapped to kiss her. She was just his type of woman: curvy, stubborn, and Texas-born.

Although Daniel hadn't had a serious relationship in years, there was something about Willa that made him want to rethink that decision. Something that made him realize just how lonely it was to have only the farm to look after. Of course, he would have Bobby now, but maybe it would be nice to have a partner again. When he imagined a woman at his side, she looked just like Willa, and his heart lobbed into his throat. Lord, what was he doing fantasizing about her like that? It was one thing to have the occasional lustful thought, but to desire something more, something real...

Now he'd really let his imagination run wild.

"Whatchoo two talking about all hush-hush like?" asked Sarah as she came to take their empty beer glasses.

Uncle James leaned back in his chair. "We ain't talking anything hush-hush. You're always hearing or seeing things that aren't there," he said. He was irritated, his usual reaction to Sarah Nevarez.

Daniel knew there was a history between his uncle and the diner owner and that they'd almost gotten married. Beyond that, over the years, he'd watched these two circle each other like feral cats, hissing and spitting.

"Now you're talking a lot of hogwash." Sarah turned to Daniel, replacing her frown with a smile. "I thought the party went good last night. That Miss Markson sure is getting lots of attention. Then again, it's not like we get a lot of pretty single ladies coming into town, do we?" She winked at Daniel, and he barely restrained a groan.

But at Sarah's mention of Willa, Daniel wondered if the woman would have a better idea than he'd been able to come up with about getting Willa to stay. Women knew things like this, about feelings and such.

“Miss Markson is wanting to get back to New York straightaway,” said Daniel, the thought hitting him in the gut, “but I really need her to stay. For Bobby, that is. I don’t know a damn thing about taking care of children.”

Sarah laughed. “Course you don’t. I’m surprised, though,” she went on, her forehead wrinkling as she considered. “Miss Markson seemed so attached to little Bobby. When is she going back?”

Daniel’s lips pulled back in a wry expression. “She was supposed to leave this weekend, but I managed to get her to stay a few more days.”

“This weekend!” Sarah’s eyes went wide. “And leave that child with two old bachelors who couldn’t keep a cactus alive? Is she crazy?”

The corners of Uncle James’ mouth turned downward. “Now, don’t be insulting—”

Sarah put the empty glasses back on the table and put her hands on her hips, leaning over James to drive her point home. “I ain’t insultin’, just speakin’ the truth. You don’t have any business raising a little one by yourself.” She pulled up a chair and sat at the table with the two men like they’d invited her to come and sit a spell. Dropping her voice to a conspiratorial tone, she added, “Now, tell me everything if you want me to help.”

Daniel told Sarah about his conversations with Willa and passed on the minimal information she’d revealed about herself. Sarah nodded, her eyes narrowing at parts of Daniel’s recitation.

By the time Daniel had finished, Uncle James looked fit to be tied. “Well?” he demanded. “You got any ideas in that nosey brain of yours?”

“Don’t distract me. I’m thinking.” Sarah tapped her lip. “It sounds like Miss Markson isn’t so great at making friends. I mean, your brother hired her, and he was always a straight-shooter, so there’s that, but you say she doesn’t have lots of friends in New York?”

“So she says,” Daniel replied.

“I have a feeling that she needs to feel like she belongs somewhere. She needs to feel like she belongs *here*.” Sarah nodded, looking as if she’d just figured out the secret to the universe. “That party of yours was a good idea, but you can’t let up. If she gets attached to the people here, she won’t want to leave so soon.” She repeated the nod, then stood up from her chair and dusted her hands. “So that’s what we’re gonna do.”

Daniel wasn’t sure how that would be different from anything he’d thought up already, but he wasn’t stupid enough to tell Sarah that.

Uncle James snorted. “So, what, you’re gonna pester the poor girl until the end of days?” He looked to his nephew. “Danny boy, don’t let this woman near Miss Markson.”

“You’re such an old grump, James Gunn, and we both know it. And my ideas are always brilliant. You just don’t want to admit it.” Sarah touched Daniel’s shoulder. “We’ll get her to stay. Don’t you worry your head.”

Sarah returned to work, leaving Uncle James to grumble under his breath and Daniel to feel hope rise inside his chest.

Sarah was right, though. Willa needed to feel like she was a part of this town, not just some outsider who was temporarily stuck here, with a whole life waiting somewhere else.

*You could make her feel extra welcome*, a sly voice in his head told him. In the same moment, he realized that getting Willa to stay meant he’d have more time with her—and more time with her alone. That thought made him want to groan.

He pulled himself up short with a firm yank on his mental reins. He needed Willa for Bobby; he didn’t need her for himself, however much he might want her. The question was: Could he keep temptation at bay, or would he give in and make Willa into more than just Bobby’s caretaker?

## EIGHT

“He’s doing well, but as I’m sure you’re aware, moving to a brand-new place with someone he’s never known would be a huge adjustment for anyone, let alone a boy his age.” Dr. Ramsey, the child psychologist Daniel and Willa had traveled to Austin to see, frowned as she glanced over to where Bobby was playing near Willa’s feet. “You say that his tantrums have increased since you got here?”

Willa knew saying “yes” would seal her fate. She could feel Daniel’s gaze boring into her, but she ignored it. She’d had to travel for two hours with Daniel driving, Bobby in the backseat, to attend this court-ordered session with a child psychologist in Austin. Dr. Ramsey was one of the best in her field when it came to small children and trauma, and when Daniel had gotten custody, the judge had also ordered that Bobby and the little boy’s caretaker should receive counseling and assistance. Daniel had argued Willa into coming along. “You count as his caretaker, you know.” She’d had to admit the truth to this. For a little while longer, anyhow.

“The tantrums have increased,” Willa admitted. “Not anything too terrible, but he seems more likely to lose it over something small. During breakfast yesterday, he wanted pancakes, and when I told him no, he screamed for twenty minutes straight.”

Willa’s head still hurt from that particular tantrum. It had come out of nowhere. One second, Bobby had been happily chatting away. The next, he was shrieking so loudly that Daniel had heard and come in from his work outside, he’d been so concerned.

Dr. Ramsey scribbled something down. “That’s not surprising, given the upheaval in his life. He’s lost his parents,” she looked from Willa to Daniel to emphasize her words, “the two most important people in a child’s life.” She shook her head. “He can’t understand what it means when people are gone forever, of course.”

“He keeps asking for them,” said Daniel gruffly. “Mostly at night. He wants his mom to put him to bed,” he gulped and then cleared his throat before continuing, “and when I can’t get her for him ...”

Hearing the sadness in Daniel’s voice for his nephew, Willa was tempted to take his hand. Come to think of it, she was feeling in need of comfort herself. They were all in upheaval, trying to figure out a situation that no one could’ve predicted. Willa thought of the funeral, how Bobby had kept asking Willa where his daddy was, where his mommy had gone. Her heart had broken afresh each time he’d asked.

“I understand you’ve been his caregiver since he was born?” Dr. Ramsey asked Willa.

She nodded and tried to smile. “Yes, that’s correct.”

The doctor looked down at her notes and then back to Willa. “Although you aren’t family, I would advise that, if at all possible, you stay to help Bobby adjust as long as you can.”

“For how long?” said Willa, her mouth gone dry.

Dr. Ramsey sighed. “Three months at the very least, but ideally, a year.”

Willa inhaled sharply, feeling punched in the gut. *A year!* She couldn’t stay in Texas for an entire year! She’d lose everything: her New York connections and, most importantly, the job she was so close to getting. She would have to give up the life she’d built, the dreams she’d just started chasing. One of her biggest fears in life was failing in New York and ending up right back where she’d started—on her father’s farm. If she had to stay in Texas for a year, she might as well change her mailing address now. The thought of it almost made her sick.

Daniel cleared his throat. Willa could almost hear him exulting over Dr. Ramsey's pronouncement. This would just give him more leverage over her, she thought darkly.

"What would happen if Ms. Markson couldn't stay that long?" he asked. "She has a life to get back to in New York."

Willa shot him a curious glance. Was he actually trying to be understanding about her situation?

Dr. Ramsey frowned. "It's difficult to say, but given Bobby's current behavior, it could lead to more serious trauma and abandonment issues. He'd most likely have behavioral issues as well."

It was like hearing the clanking of her jail cell door close in front of Willa. She swallowed against the lump in her throat, torn between wanting to see Bobby happy and healthy and wanting to live her own life. She never would've thought that answering Stacey Gunn's online ad, a lifetime ago, could've resulted in this.

After the appointment ended, the three went to get lunch at a nearby cafe. Willa's spirits rose a little when she saw the menu—actual vegetarian options!—but it wasn't enough to improve her mood entirely.

They ordered and then sat in silence broken only by Bobby's occasional comments. Willa drummed her fingers against the wooden tabletop.

If only she could get the interviewer to agree to do her interview remotely! She'd contacted Grayson West, the art gallery owner and man responsible for her fate, a few days ago, but Grayson had yet to respond to her email. She'd left him a voicemail this morning as well. She'd had to restrain herself from constantly checking her phone, although after handing Bobby a pack of crayons to scribble on the ready-for-coloring placemat, she found herself checking her email for the thousandth time.

Nothing. Had Grayson been offended that she'd even asked? Her stomach turned at the thought.

Grayson West owned Sensation, one of the most prestigious new galleries in New York. The trendy place was known for discovering exciting new talent on the cusp of stardom, and Grayson had become a celebrity in his own right within the art world. The little interaction Willa'd had with him had shown her that he was brilliant but thought very highly of himself.

When Grayson had first contacted her about interviewing for the position, he'd told her point blank that "Most candidates are a waste of my time, but you seem slightly better than most." She'd been too excited by the phone call to take offense at that backhanded compliment.

"Waiting for someone to call you?" said Daniel as she put her phone away.

"No." She didn't offer any more information.

She knew it wasn't his fault that the psychologist had said she should stay longer, but at that moment, she almost hated him. He stood for everything she'd wanted to escape when she'd left Macon in the first place. She'd wanted something different—why was that such a bad thing? But now Daniel, her father, Bobby—they were all dragging her back into a world that had never understood her and had never wanted her in the first place.

Except, she had to admit, that was unfair to Daniel. He was gruff at times, but under that exterior, Willa had seen kindness. He'd thrown that welcome party for her without her even asking. It took a thoughtful man to plan a party in a stranger's honor.

She stared at him across the table, her heart in her throat as she watched him smiling at Bobby, asking if the cows in the picture should be red, or blue, considering there were only three colors in the little set of crayons that had come with the child's placemat. She could be honest enough with herself that she found Daniel attractive, but that didn't mean anything. If she were to entangle herself any further with anyone from Texas, she'd be in an even worse fix than she was now.

Daniel looked up from the blue cow he was helpfully coloring to meet her eyes. "I went to New York once," he said,



unprompted. “About five years ago.”

Willa stared at him in surprise. “Why?”

He grinned. “You probably couldn’t credit it, but I’ve been a number of places. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. Even went up to Alaska one year for fishing.”

“What did you think of New York?”

He snorted. “Too many people and not enough sky.”

Willa bit back a smile, mostly because she’d thought the same thing when she’d moved there. It was one thing to dream of living in a place you’d seen in movies and on TV. It was another to experience it for yourself.

Willa had never seen so many people packed together in one place in her life. Where she’d grown up, you could go for miles without seeing a human being. In New York, you couldn’t escape humanity, no matter how hard you tried. But the city had embraced her with open arms and opportunity, and before long, Texas had seemed like a distant memory.

“What were you doing in New York?” she asked, swirling the water in her glass to loosen the ice cubes.

“Convention.” He nodded, probably at Willa’s continued look of surprise, and added, “I go to lots of conventions for farming, raising cattle, things like that.”

It made sense. “So that’s why you’ve been so many places.”

He rolled his shoulders, then bent to tackle another blue cow while Bobby scribbled over the cartoon sun on the placemat with the red crayon. Head bent over their art masterpiece, he continued. “I liked New York, though. I liked that people don’t mess around there. They say what they think. More people could be like that instead of pussy-footing around when everybody knows what they’re really thinking.”

Willa took a sip of her water. “I didn’t think you’d been anywhere but Texas,” she admitted. “Cowboys like you tend to stick with their own kind.”

Daniel frowned. “You may be from Texas, but sometimes I think you don’t have the slightest notion what it’s actually like

to live here.”

Willa bristled, prepared to argue the point, when Bobby accidentally snapped his crayon in half. In a fit of frustration, he swept his picture and the remainder of the crayons onto the cafe floor. Willa decided she'd take up Daniel's comment at another time.

The ride back was silent. Bobby fell asleep in his car seat almost as soon as they started moving. Willa thought, her mind going around and around the number one question that was eating at her. Daniel was obviously more comfortable with Bobby, but he was still learning. And the psychologist had spoken a truth that Willa had already known deep down: if she went away too soon, her leaving could traumatize Bobby.

She thought of Stacey and Robert, how they'd immediately welcomed her into their home. Stacey had pressed a continuing stream of little gifts on Willa over the three years Willa had worked for her. Paint, brushes, tickets to art gallery openings. Stacey had been one of those people everyone liked, with her infectious smile and kind heart.

Willa's heart squeezed, tears threatening at the bittersweet memories of her dear friends. She couldn't leave their little boy. Stacey had entrusted him to Willa's care, and although they couldn't have foreseen this tragedy, Willa had made them a promise to care for him as best she could.

She didn't know how she'd manage to hold onto her life in New York, but at this point, the sleeping boy in the back seat was what was most important.

## NINE

Willa had been told that the local rec center was worth a trip, but she hadn't expected anything this new and this big, considering the small size of the town. She was fairly certain the town's whole population could fit into this one huge building.

Nondescript on the outside, inside it boasted an indoor swimming pool, an exercise room, basketball courts, and a brightly colored indoor playground for little ones. The second Willa stepped onto the playground with Bobby, his eyes widened, and he headed straight to the giant foam blocks near the door.

Small children were playing everywhere, the noise bouncing off the walls, making it hard to hear. But Willa didn't care about the noise. Bobby, who'd been both prone to tantrums and lately extremely clingy with Willa, was finally smiling and laughing the way he had back in New York.

"I want that one!" said Bobby suddenly, eyeing a large blue block that another child was playing with.

"You can play with this one." Willa bent down and handed him a yellow block. She picked up another block, laid it down in front of Bobby, and began to stack other blocks on top of it. Soon they had started a game that involved Willa stacking blocks and Bobby pushing the tower of blocks over onto the ground and then laughing.

"Willa, look, look!" Bobby shouted to Willa to get her attention and then upset the block tower onto the ground,

squealing with laughter.

A woman and her daughter were playing nearby, the daughter about Bobby's age. The little girl joined in the game, which to Willa's relief, Bobby allowed without throwing a fit.

"I haven't seen you here before," the little girl's mother said, sitting herself down on the floor next to Willa. "I'm DeeDee McClair. That's my daughter, Izzy."

"I'm Willa Markson." Willa shook DeeDee's hand. "That's Bobby Gunn."

DeeDee's eyes widened. "Oh, Robert's boy! You must be his nanny that's in town. No wonder I didn't recognize you." DeeDee dimpled as she smiled, and her Texas twang was infectious. She didn't look much older than Willa, although opposite in terms of looks: blonde, tall, and wearing all kinds of jewelry, she was like a parrot to Willa's sparrow.

"I guess I'm getting a reputation around here," said Willa wryly.

"Mostly people are only curious. We don't get a lot of new folks, you know. Anytime we do, it's like the president has stopped by for some sweet tea." DeeDee suddenly turned away from the conversation and raised her voice to say, "Izzy, play nice!" DeeDee rolled her eyes. "That girl is gonna be a heap of trouble when she's older."

Seeing Izzy grabbing at Bobby's block and Bobby resisting with all his might, Willa had to agree. The two women stopped the potential fight before it could erupt into screams, blows, or tears. A moment later, the two children were playing like old friends, having forgotten their disagreement.

"You staying with Daniel while you're here?" said DeeDee.

Willa could hear the unspoken question in DeeDee's words, but she ignored it. "Yes. I'd planned to stay at the bed and breakfast, but Bobby doesn't do so great when I'm not around." She sighed. "I'm sleeping on a cot next to his bed every night."

DeeDee clucked her tongue. "Poor baby. I was so sad to hear about Robert. He and I were just a year apart in school. He

graduated the year before I did.” She shook her head. “He and his brother were famous around this town.”

Willa was surprised. That didn’t sound like the Robert she’d known. “Why? What did they do?”

DeeDee laughed. “Nothin’ but be handsome and charming! Well, Robert was; Daniel tended to be too focused on the farm after their parents died.”

Willa’s ears pricked. Robert had mentioned that his parents had died, but Willa hadn’t known how long ago he’d lost them or how it had happened.

Her curiosity got the better of her. “What happened to their parents?”

DeeDee’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, you don’t know?” She lowered her voice and leaned closer. “Drunk driver hit ’em. On the way to the feed store in town, can you believe it? I remember the day it happened, because I was at Jack’s drinking a milkshake with Doug—he’s my husband now—and we heard the crash. We all ran outside and knew it was the Gunns’ truck that had been hit.”

She frowned deeply. “The driver was some trucker from out of town who’d gotten drunk on the job that afternoon. He hit them head-on. They died instantly.”

“Just like Robert and Stacey,” whispered Willa. What kind of cruel universe allowed not only Daniel’s parents but his brother and sister-in-law to die so tragically? Her heart twisted. She couldn’t imagine that kind of loss. Her own mother had died when she’d been young, but she still had her father, as frustrating as he was.

DeeDee didn’t seem to notice but prattled on in a matter-of-fact tone. “Terrible, isn’t it? I couldn’t believe it when I heard the news about Robert and Stacey. Were you close with them?” Seeing Willa’s face, DeeDee put a hand on Willa’s arm and said quickly, “Oh, I’m sorry. What a stupid question! Don’t mind me. I have a big mouth. Dougie is always telling me to keep it shut because I’m always putting my foot in it.”

Willa tried to smile. "It's okay. We were friends. I miss them every day."

"Of course you do, honey." DeeDee patted Willa's arm. "And here you are, still looking after their little boy. That says everything."

Willa winced inwardly. She wasn't about to tell DeeDee that she wanted to leave, although she'd only recently decided she was going to be staying a while for Bobby's sake. Grayson had finally responded to her email with a curt, single line saying, *Fine, we'll figure something out*. Willa had breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't decided to choose the other candidate, a woman named Paige Laughlin. Willa had met Paige once, and a single conversation with the beautiful, accomplished woman had made Willa want to crawl under a rock. She had wanted to cry when she'd realized they'd be competing for the same position at Sensation.

"Willa, look!" said Bobby. He was currently stacking blocks on his own.

"How cute!" said a voice over the two women's shoulders.

Turning, Willa saw the diner owner, Sarah.

"Hi Sarah, how's the diner doing?" said DeeDee.

"It's going, but today I needed a day off. You gals use the pool here, yet? I can't get enough of it."

"Every time I think about using the pool, I feel guilty about leaving Izzy at home when there's this playground here."

"What about you, Willa?" asked Sarah. "Are you a swimmer?"

"Sometimes, but I didn't bring a swimsuit with me."

"Then you should get one! There's also an outdoor pool you should take Bobby to. I can give you some free passes," DeeDee said.

Willa couldn't help but smile at the woman's friendliness.

"Thank you," said Willa, pushing away the memories. "I'd love to go to the pool with Bobby. Stacey was taking him to

swimming lessons in New York, but obviously he hasn't been in the water for a while."

"Excellent, I'll be sure to get those passes to Daniel if I don't see you again soon."

"I'm going to go take that swim. I'll see you ladies around, you hear?" Sarah waved, her braid swishing as she walked away.

At that moment, Izzy swiped one of Bobby's blocks and Bobby started crying. The adults jumped in, Willa consoling him as DeeDee apologized and scolded by turns.

"We should get lunch sometime!" shouted DeeDee over the crying children. "There's a group of us with little ones that goes out for drinks on weekends, too. You should join us."

Normally, Willa avoided large groups of women who were like DeeDee, but she also knew that if she was going to stay here for any amount of time at all, she couldn't isolate herself completely. Besides, she needed women to talk to. Daniel and James Gunn were hardly ardent conversationalists.

She put on her best smile. "I'd love to! Do you bring your kids?"

DeeDee threw back her head and laughed. "Oh lordy, no, not to girls' night! We need a break and some margaritas without children, no matter how much I love 'em." She planted a smacking kiss on Izzy's cheek.

Willa had told herself she wouldn't get attached to anyone in this town, but it seemed as though, despite her best efforts, she was going to break that promise.

## TEN

“Put that table in that corner. Yeah, right there.” Daniel squinted as he looked at the layout of the shed. “Wait, should the table be closer to the window?”

Uncle James huffed in annoyance. “Good Lord, boy, how should I know? This was *your* harebrained scheme, remember?”

As Daniel had lain in bed wondering how he could take Sarah’s advice and apply it, it had occurred to him that clearing out the shed out back to create an art studio for Willa would be a perfect idea. He’d told Uncle James, who’d harrumphed but had eventually agreed to help, and now they were putting Daniel’s plan into action.

But now Daniel had his doubts. He knew as much about setting up an art studio as he did about children. Nothing.

“Leave the table there. If she wants it moved, she’ll tell us.” Daniel surveyed their hard work and smiled. He couldn’t let doubts plague him. This was the perfect way to show Willa that there were people in this town who cared about her, and that she could make a life here.

*You just want her to stay for yourself,* his mind whispered.

*No,* he told himself. Bobby needed her. He was doing this for Bobby. If a little piece of New York in the form of an art studio could entice Willa to stay, then Daniel would buy her paint and sketchbooks and brushes for the rest of her life. Or at least for the next year as Bobby settled in.



“I still don’t see why you didn’t ask the little lady before doing all of this,” said James after they’d finished, cleaned up after themselves, and settled into the rocking chairs on the porch to catch a bit of the breeze that had kicked up. “Are you sure she’ll like it?”

“She’s an artist, isn’t she? Why wouldn’t she?”

Uncle James shrugged. “Women are strange like that. I swear, any time you think the sky is blue, they’ll try to convince you that it’s pink polka dots.”

Considering that Uncle James had been single for longer than Daniel had been alive, Daniel wasn’t likely to take his uncle’s advice.

Willa was at the rec center with Bobby but should arrive back at the farmhouse shortly. Daniel hadn’t felt this kind of anticipation since waiting for Willa and Bobby to first arrive. This time, though, the expectancy wouldn’t be tinged with sadness at the circumstances. Right now, he could hardly wait to see the surprise and happiness on Willa’s face.

“Can I give you a bit of advice?” said Uncle James as they sat on the porch together. He’d drawn out a cigar and began puffing on it, his face contemplative.

Daniel was tempted to say no, so he said nothing.

“I’ve seen the way you look at the little lady. Now, don’t get your dander up—I don’t mean nothin’ by it. I told you before, she’s a pretty thing, and I don’t blame you for being a man.” Uncle James took a pull from his cigar as he continued speaking. “But she’s also told you point-blank that she ain’t planning on staying around, either.”

“So?”

“My point, my boy, is that you’ll get your heart broken by a woman who was honest with you from the beginning. She don’t want nothing to do with Texas. When a lady tells you something like that, you better believe her.”

“And you were the one who said I should pursue her.”

Uncle James puffed on his cigar. “The more I thought about it, the more I realized I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not that she isn’t a good catch. It’s just that I think you should be careful, is all I’m sayin’.”

“Thanks for the advice, but it’s not like I’m falling in love with her,” Daniel said, his tone harsh.

Uncle James held up his hands in surrender. “All righty.” He eyed his nephew and added in a mutter, “Just don’t dig up more snakes’n you can kill.”

Some fifteen minutes later, Willa drove up and parked the car. Bobby clung to her hand as they climbed the steps to the porch, and when Daniel rose to greet them, Bobby hid behind her leg.

“Hey, Bobby,” said Daniel softly as he crouched down to Bobby’s level. “What did you do today?”

“We played with blocks, didn’t we?” said Willa.

Sometimes Bobby didn’t mind Daniel’s presence, and other times, like right now, he was a skittish mule with a thunderstorm on the horizon. Daniel had yet to figure out what made the little boy scared and what didn’t. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason for it.

“I played with Izzy,” said Bobby at last.

“Who’s Izzy?”

“That’s the new friend we made,” explained Willa. To Daniel, she added, “I met DeeDee McClair and her daughter at the rec center. Izzy is about Bobby’s age.”

“Ah.” Daniel rocked back on his heels, wondering now how he’d tell Willa about the art studio in his shed. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. He started by clearing his throat, and when she looked inquiringly at him, he said, “I want to show you something.”

“I’ll watch Little Britches while you do that,” said Uncle James. He put out his cigar and grabbed a stray toy fire truck that had ended up on the porch. Bobby’s eyes lit up, and like a moth to a flame, he was at his great uncle’s side.

“Oh, well, okay.” Willa’s face crinkled with confusion, but she followed Daniel around the house to the shed out back. When they reached it, she joked, “Do you want to show me your tools?” Then she blushed, and Daniel could almost see the thoughts in her head. Come to think of it, the same thought had crossed his mind in the same moment.

He choked back a laugh. “Nothing like that,” he drawled. He pushed open the shed and beckoned her to enter.

Willa stared. “What is this? Are you teaching art now?” She touched a box of paints on the table near the window.

“Me? Nah. This is for you. To do your art.”

Willa stared at him, blinking in shock, then turned her head to survey the small space. She said nothing as she took in the supplies and the furniture. She was so silent, in fact, that Daniel felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Shouldn’t she be thanking him? Jumping up and down in excitement? But no, Willa was completely wordless, so unlike her usual self that Daniel knew somehow he’d screwed up. How or why, he didn’t know. Damn Uncle James for being right.

“How do you like it?” he couldn’t help asking.

She bit her lip. “It’s nice.” As if realizing her bad manners, she added quickly, “Thank you for this. It was very kind of you.” Willa went quiet again, and the blush that had colored her cheeks earlier was gone. She looked as pale as if she’d seen a ghost.

As Daniel drew closer to her, he realized with shock that her eyes were shimmering with tears. Oh God, he couldn’t deal with women’s tears. They’d gotten him in a whole host of trouble before.

And seeing a strong woman like Willa crying? It tore at him. He wanted to fall to his knees and beg her not to cry, that he’d do anything, just please, don’t cry.

“What is it? I should’ve asked you, shouldn’t I? You don’t have to use it—”

Willa shook her head, smiling sadly. “No, it was very kind of you to do this. Really. I’m just so surprised, that’s all.” She gulped and added, “I didn’t expect anyone to do something like this for me.”

Daniel could read between the lines of that last sentence: *Nobody has cared about me like this before.* How had a woman like her not been cherished the way she deserved? She should have all the art studios her little heart desires until that smile never left her pretty face.

She wiped her eyes and blinked at him. “God, I’m a mess. I really do like it. Please don’t think I don’t. It was just a shock.” She turned away to pick up a sketchbook and smiled. “I’d regretted that I hadn’t brought a sketchbook with me here. This is perfect.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

When she smiled at him like he’d given her the moon, he realized that he was catching feelings for her. He’d tried to deny it to Uncle James, but he couldn’t lie to himself.

He wouldn’t have put this all together if he didn’t feel something for her. He suddenly wished with an intensity he could barely comprehend that she wouldn’t stay simply for Bobby’s sake—that she’d stay for him, too.

“Did you really pick all of this out yourself?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said sheepishly, then hurried to explain. “I mean, I asked the lady on the phone what she’d recommend since I don’t know anything about painting. I didn’t even know there were so many types of paints.”

“Goodness, you got every variety? Acrylics, oils, watercolors ...” Willa shook her head. “How can I repay this? I can’t imagine what all this cost.”

Daniel frowned. “It’s a gift. You don’t have to repay me. I *wanted* to do it.”

Willa nibbled on her lip, like she wanted to argue but something made her think better of it. “I usually do watercolors, although I’ve done some oil paintings. I haven’t

used acrylics hardly at all. I guess this will be my chance to experiment.”

A paintbrush rolled to the ground, and Daniel and Willa both reached for it. Their hands touched and lightning shot through him at the feel of her fingers against his skin. He noticed just how close she was. Close enough to count every one of her long eyelashes. Goodness, she was pretty. He could feel the heat of her, the warm brush of her breath as it ghosted across his face. Daniel’s eyes lifted to her lips, to the soft sliver of tongue that darted out to moisten them. In that moment, he wanted to kiss her. Really kiss her. Here, there, and everywhere. He wanted to skim his lips across her silken skin, tasting every inch as he went. And by the dark look in her eyes, maybe she wanted to kiss him back. The realization hit him as hard as an oncoming train. So hard in fact that he gasped her name. But before he could say anything else, he heard Bobby cry out.





When the two of them returned to Uncle James and Bobby, Bobby shot straight to Willa the moment he saw her.

“Willa! Where did you go?” The little face was tearstained, his cheeks red.

“Oh, no ... Bobby, honey, I wasn’t gone for very long.” She picked him up and patted his back as he sniffled. To Uncle James, she said, “Was he crying the entire time I was gone?”

Uncle James let out a sigh. “Mostly. I tried to get the little cowpoke to calm down, but he wasn’t having it. Stubborn as his father, that one.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think we’d be that long.” Bobby let out a hiccupping sob. She smiled down at him and tousled his silky hair, and something inside Daniel twisted at the love in the gesture. “I’ll take him inside.”

Daniel sat down next to Uncle James and stretched his legs out in front of him. He could hear Willa moving around inside his house, and where normally he’d be antsy about anyone messing with his stuff, by now he’d gotten used to her somehow.

Funny how that had happened.

“How’d she take it?” said Uncle James.

“She was happy.” He deftly avoided mentioning anything about the almost-kiss over a paintbrush.

Uncle James grunted. “Well, I gotta say, she has to stay if Bobby throws a fit any dang old time she leaves.”

Daniel silently agreed, although it just brought up another worry. What if by the time Willa did leave, Bobby hadn’t fully adjusted to his new home with his uncles?

## ELEVEN

It was one of those Texas summer storms that blew in out of nowhere. That morning, the sun had been shining, the sky clear. By afternoon, the blue sky had turned gray with warning, and by late afternoon, it was raining so hard that if Willa hadn't grown up in Texas, she would've been afraid the roof would cave in from how loud it sounded.

At first, Bobby didn't seem to mind the rain. But when flashes of lightning ended in big booms of thunder, he became fearful, clinging to Willa all afternoon. She could barely go to the bathroom without him underfoot.

Willa turned on the news to watch the weather, but there were no tornadoes nearby—just nasty thunderstorms. She prayed that would remain the case.

She also hoped the power didn't go out, or worse, that she'd lose cell phone service. She had a flight later that day to New York for her first interview with Grayson West. If some stupid tornado kept her from that ...

"Bobby, do you think I'll get this job?" she asked.

Bobby picked up one of his cars, paying no mind to her question. "It's loud outside," he repeated. It was all he kept saying, each time the thunder sounded.

Willa glanced out the window. Daniel was still out working, although Willa wondered if that just meant hunkering down in his barn until the storm blew over. He couldn't work out in the fields in this weather! Besides, the lightning was so close he'd risk getting struck.



The storm kept on, and when Daniel came inside, soaking wet and fit to be tied, Willa was so surprised by his appearance, she couldn't speak.

His clothes clung to his muscular frame, and his sandy hair was plastered to his skull. Willa thought of that moment in the shed the other day, when she thought he might have kissed her. Right now it felt like a missed opportunity, but Daniel barely glanced at her and Bobby as he fetched some supplies from a nearby closet.

"Are you still working in this?" she asked, incredulous.

He just grunted. "The fence blew over in this damn wind, and now the cows are going to get into the corn field if I don't stop them. They'll destroy the plants within minutes."

Right then, Uncle James drove up in his truck and hopped out, running into the house before he could get too soaked. "What a storm that is!"

But Willa was focused on Daniel. She'd been a farm kid once, so she knew that if his corn crops were destroyed, he'd be hurting for years. That was his livelihood.

"Let me help you," she said before she could rethink the words. Then she remembered: her flight! But she couldn't leave Daniel in this. Besides, there was no way a flight was taking off in this weather. She'd have to figure out a way to reschedule. She'd tell Grayson she'd gotten stormed in.

Daniel stared at her. "You? You sure?"

"It's okay," she said before turning to say to Uncle James, "Watch Bobby for us, will you? Turn up the TV real loud so he doesn't hear the storm. It'll help. I'm going to help Daniel mend the fence."

Uncle James blinked, looked at Daniel, then laughed. "Right you are, little lady. Get to it!" His smile turned embarrassed. "I'd offer to help, but we both know my old bones are useless when it comes to farm work."

Daniel clapped his uncle on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Willa, grab your coat and put on some boots. There should be a small pair in the closet you can use."

Willa found the boots and stuffed them on her feet, taking a quick second to send off a text to Grayson, letting him know that she was probably going to have to reschedule her flight.

By the time Willa and Daniel were outside, the rain had let up a little, the storm slowly passing along toward the east. Willa just hoped they wouldn't get another hailstorm. Getting conked on the head by a huge ball of ice did not sound at all appealing.

“Right, I need you to hold up the fence right here as I mend it. I already disconnected the electric wire, so don't worry about that. See the cows out there? They've been moving this way quickly, especially with the storm going on. If we don't get this done in time, they'll stampede right on through the fence to the corn.”

Daniel's face was grim but determined. Willa nodded, keeping hold of the fence—it was heavier than it looked—as Daniel crouched in the wet mud and began to work. Rain dripped into Willa's eyes, but she couldn't wipe it away. The humidity made her raincoat stick to her bare arms, and she couldn't tell if the water dripping down her back was rain or sweat. Probably both.

“Hold that post up straight. Higher. Yeah, like that.” Daniel pulled a nail that he'd had between his lips and began hammering. The jolting of the hammer went up Willa's arms, but she clenched her jaw and held on.

Over Daniel's shoulder, she could see the cows getting closer. It was like a brown and white mass; not one cow staying behind or going off on their own. Over the sounds of the now distant thunder, she could hear their lowing.

“Daniel, they're getting closer,” she warned. Now she could make out individual cows. The one at the front had horns that Willa did not want to get too close to.

“Almost finished.” Daniel nailed another piece together before whooping, “Done! You can let it go now.”

Willa did, almost reluctantly, but the post stayed up. She let out a deep sigh of relief as she surveyed the now mended

fence.

Daniel grinned at her as he took in her wet clothes and muddy boots. She probably looked a fright.

“Let’s get inside before we get blown away,” he said.

As Willa followed Daniel inside, she was once again struck by how very wet he was, and how his shirt clung to him. Did the man have muscles upon muscles? She watched a drop of rain trail down the nape of his neck to his shirt collar, and her mind instantly wanted to taste that raindrop on her tongue.

*Down, girl. No licking the cowboy!*

Daniel took his boots off on the porch, and Willa did the same. When she took off her raincoat, stylish enough for New York city streets but no match for a Texas gully washer, she saw that rain had somehow gotten through anyway, soaking her shirt all the way through.

Daniel had also noticed. His eyes had narrowed, his gaze intense, and Willa felt her nipples tighten under that heated look. It didn’t help that her shirt was basically see-through at this point.

She could see the struggle in Daniel’s face. He leaned toward her. Would he kiss her? She wanted him to. She wanted him to make good on what had almost happened in the shed. Or maybe what she imagined had almost happened. Her heart pounded. But then what? Would they stop there, or would she beg him for more? She half wanted to ask him to take her right there on the porch.

But he just said, “Get inside before you freeze.” Then he turned away.

She gaped after him, feeling foolish. She must’ve imagined his interest. God, she was an idiot!

Willa made her dripping way to Bobby’s room where her things were, changed into dry clothes, and went back into the living room. Bobby had fallen asleep on the couch, Uncle James watching the local news next to him on a low volume.

“Where’s Daniel?” she asked quietly as she sat down next to Bobby.

“Taking a shower. You two fix that fence?”

“We did.” Pride filled Willa, and then she remembered: her message to Grayson! Had he gotten back to her? Was he angry about the delay?

She grabbed her phone to see three missed calls and two voicemails. Grimacing, she listened to both, knowing she’d have to do some major groveling to get back on Grayson’s good side.

*Call me when you get this, he said in the second voicemail. Although you’ll have to leave me a message because I’ll be interviewing the other candidate for the next hour.*

Willa left Grayson a voicemail, apologizing profusely, hoping that they could reschedule.

Daniel came into the living room ten minutes later, a towel draped over his shoulders, his hair wet from his shower.

“The little lady tells me you fixed the fence all right,” said Uncle James.

Daniel nodded, his gaze still on Willa. “We did. Without her help, the corn would’ve been cow pies in no time.”

“And here we thought you could only paint! You have some farming skills, Miss Markson. Must be your Texas roots,” drawled Uncle James. His voice echoed with pride.

“She’s definitely not merely an artist,” said Daniel, all seriousness. “Thank you again, Willa. I couldn’t have done that without your help.”

Willa felt a blush climb to her cheeks, and the pride she felt warred with the guilt in her gut. She truly hoped Grayson would let her reschedule. That he wouldn’t select Paige as the better candidate because he thought Willa wasn’t serious about the role. But then Daniel smiled at her, and suddenly the way he looked at her felt like the most important thing in the world.

She barely heard Uncle James clear his throat beside her. The old man added, getting up from his seat, “Well, I should be

going now that the storm has started letting up. I just wanted to stop by to say hi. You two have a good evening.” He tipped his hat to Willa and headed out.

“I’ll get dinner started.” Willa got up and pushed past Daniel.

Dinner, she could do. It was easier than thinking about her missed interview and how badly she wanted Daniel Gunn to kiss her.

## TWELVE

Willa had only been away from New York for a month, but she couldn't help the feeling that she couldn't recognize the city she loved. Everything was so *loud*. She could barely hear her own thoughts above the din. If it wasn't someone yelling or laughing, it was someone laying on their car horn or tires screeching in the streets.

By the time Willa arrived at Sensation, she wondered if she'd made a big mistake in taking this interview despite everything that had happened. But she pushed that thought aside. She was just tired from traveling. It'd be stupid to read more into the situation than that. Especially when she was so close to achieving her dream.

It took twenty minutes for Grayson to emerge from his office. The gallery owner was of average height and build, his face neither ugly nor handsome, but he had that slick city look about him that made him seem important. It helped that his clothes were expensive and expertly tailored, and his watch had probably cost more than Willa had ever made in a year.

An unbidden thought came to her mind of Daniel. Daniel probably bought new clothes once every five years, and only out of necessity. What would he think of somebody like Grayson?

"You're here. Finally." Grayson didn't smile or extend his hand in greeting but simply waved at Willa to follow him. "I thought you weren't ever going to get out of Tennessee."

“Texas,” corrected Willa. She almost had to sprint to keep up with Grayson. “I’m so sorry again about rescheduling, but I so appreciate that you’re willing to interview me—”

Grayson waved a lazy hand. “I don’t have time for this.” He picked up a folder off of his desk and handed it to her. “I need you to catalogue these items here in the gallery. They’re all in the closet in the back; you can ask Janine to let you in. We recently added a number of items, but my assistant has been on maternity leave, and she’s been unable to find the time to do it.” Grayson’s lip curled. “She’s stuck at home with a baby, doing nothing, so how long would it take her?”

Willa decided not to answer that particular question. Flipping through the documents inside the folder, she felt her heart lighten. She’d missed this so much without even realizing it. If she could impress Grayson today—

“Are you waiting for me, or are you just wasting time?” said Grayson.

Willa blushed. “Sorry. I’ll get started right away. When do you need this by?”

Grayson shrugged. “Before three p.m., because that’s when I’m going home.”

That gave Willa three hours. After Janine let her into the closet—more like a huge, airy room that was off-limits to guests—Willa flipped through the documents.

Willa found the first item—a purple ceramic vase—and noted the artist and year that had already been scribbled onto the paper. But when Willa gently lifted the vase and noted the artist, she realized that the vase had been mislabeled on the document. Frowning, she crossed out what had already been written and wrote down the correct artist and year.

It soon became apparent to Willa that someone had already tried cataloguing these items but had mixed them all up. A painting attributed to one artist was actually an entirely different artist’s work. There was even a box of jewelry that, when Willa looked more closely, had actually come from different jewelers instead of the one noted on the document.

She groaned. She was supposed to just check off the items in the closet, not completely redo this person's shoddy work! But knowing that if she tried to use that excuse on Grayson, she'd just get chewed out, Willa worked for three hours straight until everything was in order, not even taking a break to pee.

When she gave her work over to Grayson, he simply tossed it on his desk without a glance at the sheaf of papers. Pulling on his jacket, he said, "I'll have Janine call you to schedule the next part of the interview."

No *thank you*, no praise, not even criticism—nothing. Willa wished she could strangle the man. But at least he'd mentioned continuing the process, right? That meant she wasn't out of the running.

As Grayson was about to leave, though, an older woman stepped into his office, her chin high and her hair so big that Willa wondered if she might be from Texas. You didn't see hair that big and blonde anywhere in New York, that was for sure.

"Are you leaving?" the woman demanded of Grayson as he settled his jacket on his shoulders. "We had a meeting today!"

"Did we? I distinctly remember telling Janine to cancel that." Grayson moved past the woman without a second glance.

The woman turned a dark shade of purple and marched after Grayson. "I give this gallery my money, and this is how you treat me? Like you can ignore me any time you want?"

Grayson smiled slightly. "Mrs. Dennison, you don't give us that much money. Besides, I have a more important meeting in Brooklyn right now. Talk to Janine about rescheduling."

Mrs. Dennison practically shook with indignation. "I'm not rescheduling a second time! I told you I wasn't going to let you pawn me off. If you don't want me to be a patron anymore, I won't. I have better places to give my money."

Willa watched as Grayson scowled and Mrs. Dennison's chin quivered with rage. Realizing the two were at a stalemate, she interjected, "Ma'am, I can help you reschedule your appointment with Mr. West."



Mrs. Dennison whirled. “I don’t want to reschedule! Are you deaf, girl?”

“Mr. West wasn’t aware that he had an appointment with you today. I believe there must have been a misunderstanding, but I know he’d rather be able to give you his full attention at a later time than give you a short meeting right now.” Willa turned to Grayson. “Isn’t that right, Mr. West?”

Surprise suffused Grayson’s expression, but he smoothed it over quickly. “Yes, of course. A misunderstanding.” He raised an eyebrow. “You’ll assist Mrs. Dennison?”

“Of course,” said Willa cheerfully.

Realizing she’d been expertly handled, Mrs. Dennison deflated. Willa led her to Janine at the front desk and helped her reschedule—or, rather, schedule for the first time—her appointment with Grayson. Willa couldn’t help but think of Sarah Nevarez, and about how she’d told Willa one day that you could make much more progress using honey to catch flies than using vinegar.

*It’s always temptin’ to use vinegar. Sometimes you wanna douse those flies in it. But killin’ the flies ain’t gonna help you, and so honey is your best bet.*

“By chance,” said Willa as Mrs. Dennison was about to depart, “are you from Texas?”

Mrs. Dennison blinked and then laughed. “How could you tell? I thought I’d gotten rid of my accent!”

“It might’ve been the hair,” she said wryly.

Mrs. Dennison patted her mane of blonde hair. “Only another Texan would’ve noticed that. Well, no wonder you were so useful today. I don’t trust that Grayson as far as I can throw him, but if he’s smart enough to hire a Texas gal like you? Then he can’t be all bad.”

“That was cleverly handled,” said Grayson as Willa exited the gallery.

Willa hadn’t known Grayson had still been there, watching her. “Sir?”

“I wasn’t so sure about you, especially with all the delays you’ve been throwing out, but anyone who can get Mrs. Dennison to calm down is worth my time. I look forward to the next part of our interview.”

Willa gaped at Grayson’s back as he hailed a taxi. A compliment—he’d complimented her! She barely restrained herself from doing a happy dance on the Manhattan sidewalk.

Maybe she’d get this job after all!

After finding a nearby place to have lunch, Willa went down to the water to calm her thoughts. But soon her phone rang, and her heart pinched when she saw that it was Daniel. God, she missed Bobby. She hadn’t thought a day away would be this painful, but it hit her like a ton of bricks right then.

“Somebody has been asking for you,” said Daniel, his handsome face popping up on Willa’s phone. Daniel smiled as he moved so the screen showed Bobby. “It’s Willa, buddy.”

Bobby stared into the phone as Willa waved. Then he said, “Willa! Where are you?”

“I’m in New York, remember? But I’ll be back tomorrow, I promise.”

Bobby’s lip quivered. “Can you come back now?” Tears welled in his eyes, but to Willa’s surprise, Daniel distracted the boy with a toy fire truck before the tears could turn into a full-fledged tantrum.

“You definitely need to come back,” he said with a wry smile, after Bobby had run off to race his fire truck along the floor, imitating a siren. “How’d your interview go?”

Touched that he’d ask, she told him that it hadn’t been so much an interview as seeing how she handled random projects. Daniel nodded thoughtfully, and when she told him about Mrs. Dennison, he laughed.

“Sounds like you made a good impression. You gonna have to go back soon?”

“Yes, but I don’t know when.”

Daniel's expression closed off slightly, and Willa felt her heart contract painfully. If she actually got this job, then that would be it, wouldn't it? She'd leave Bobby with his family, and she'd continue making the life she'd always dreamed of. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? The New York City art scene—prestigious galleries, classy showings. If the compliments from Grayson were anything to go by, she could have it all. And she would finally belong to that supportive community of artists that she'd been looking for since leaving home.

It also meant she would never see Bobby or Daniel Gunn again.

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she talked to Bobby once more before telling Daniel goodbye. Sitting by the water for a while longer, she wondered for the thousandth time if she was doing the right thing. Was it selfish to keep pursuing her dream when others needed her so badly? But Bobby wasn't her son—he wasn't even her blood. He was Daniel's nephew, and Daniel needed to take the reins in caring for him.

She knew that, but it didn't help her feel less guilty. Suddenly wishing she was somewhere quieter and calmer, she rose and went to her hotel, looking forward for the first time in her life to getting back to Texas.

## THIRTEEN

Daniel shaded his eyes as he watched Willa hang laundry on the line. Bobby hovered around her feet, “helping” her by holding up the clean garments only to drag them across the grass in the process, which made Daniel laugh.

For a brief moment, Daniel could almost imagine that Bobby was his son and Willa was his wife. Then he wouldn’t have to wish for a reason to touch her. She’d be his and he’d be hers, and he could sink his hands into those dark curls any time he wanted. He closed his eyes. The thought was so potent it threatened to overwhelm him.

He’d told himself for so many years he was fine living by himself that he’d truly come to believe it. After he’d broken up with his ex-fiancée, Caroline, he’d vowed never to let himself fall so hard for a woman again.

He and Caroline had dated in high school. She’d stayed by his side when he’d lost his parents, had been his comfort and his strength in a time when he’d desperately needed it. He’d thought she was the one with a capital T and a capital O. He’d proposed the day after their high school graduation.

Caroline had been easy to love. She was pretty and vivacious, with the kind of sparkling personality other people gravitated toward. It helped that she came from a rich family—the richest in town, in fact—and she would throw parties all the time for her classmates.

Daniel, a football player, but hardly the most popular guy in school, had been a little stunned when Caroline had agreed to

go out with him in his senior year. It had been like someone had given him the moon. And God Almighty, but to his teenage brain, Caroline had been the sun, the moon, and the stars. He'd loved her as fiercely and as purely as a kid who'd just lost his parents could.

After Daniel's parents had died, Caroline had kept asking him odd questions about the farm, but he hadn't thought much about them. She hadn't known a damn thing about farming. Daniel had thought she was just trying to be supportive.

That was until the day Daniel had received an offer to sell his family's beloved farm to a big agri company that had tried to get his parents to sell years prior. When Caroline had found out, she'd done her level best to get him to sell. *We could get out of here. We could be rich. Who needs a farm? There aren't any small farmers, anymore. Danny, do it for me?*

Daniel had almost given in, but he'd come to his senses. He'd soon realized that Caroline had wanted money—or at least the potential for a lot of money—more than she'd wanted Daniel himself. When he'd told her that he'd turned down the offer, she'd pulled the diamond off her finger and thrown it in his face.

It was only later he learned that her once-rich father had lost a lot of his money in bad investments. Caroline was looking for another rich guy—this time, a husband—so she could continue being the pretty, rich girl. Daniel realized later, despite his heartbreak, that he'd come off lucky. If he'd married Caroline, she would've done her best to take everything if he'd ever tried to leave her.

His breakup with Caroline had left him bitter. He'd only had brief flings in the years following. Sex was easy, and with women who wanted nothing more than a warm body to cuddle up to, it made things simple. Better yet, Daniel could focus on the farm without having to worry about a woman wanting his attention. Because if he accomplished anything, it would be keeping his parents' farm going the way they'd wanted him to.

He pushed the memories of Caroline aside. Willa was as like Caroline as fresh corn was like canned. He grinned at the

thought. He had a feeling neither lady would enjoy the comparison to his favorite vegetable, no matter how apt it might be.

For the first time since he'd asked Caroline to marry him, though, he was thinking of marriage. A wife. A family. It was a dangerous train of thought, considering Willa was hardly begging to fill that role for him. He wasn't even certain she *liked* him, let alone wanted something more with him.

He shook his head. He was floating in the clouds, acting like some teenage girl, when he needed to get work done and stop daydreaming. He knew very well that he didn't have the time to devote to a wife and family. It would take everything he had to take care of Bobby once Willa went back to New York for good.

"Oh!" A gust of wind snagged the shirt from Willa's fingers, and it blew straight toward Daniel, Willa hurrying after it.

Daniel, his legs longer, went after the shirt that was now closer to him and rapidly approaching, carried by the wind. In a comedy of errors, at the same moment Daniel caught the shirt, Willa tripped over something in the grass and came barreling toward him.

"Whoa, there!" Daniel caught her around the waist only a second before she would've fallen into a nice patch of sticky mud. "You okay?"

She laughed breathlessly. "I'm fine. Sorry. I almost ran you over!"

It only took another second for Daniel to feel how much of a pleasant armful Willa was. And today, of all days, she was wearing a pretty yellow sundress that made her look like a summer daisy. Her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders, and Daniel saw she'd gained more freckles since coming to Texas. They were especially prominent on her nose and cheeks.

"What are you staring at?" Her voice was breathy.

He knew he should let her go, but a voice in his mind kept saying, *not yet*.

“You’re all freckles,” he said because it was true.

“Oh, no. I put on sunscreen, but I get them anyway. Are they super dark?” She sounded genuinely annoyed at the thought of them.

Daniel felt the corners of his mouth pull back into a grin. “No, and you shouldn’t try to get rid of them.”

Her eyes widened. “I shouldn’t?”

“No. They’re pretty,” he said, his voice almost a growl.

Willa inhaled sharply, making her breasts rise and fall against the cotton neckline of her dress. Just like that time in the shed, Daniel had the overwhelming urge to kiss her. To ravish her with just his lips. To do any number of wicked things that would leave her gasping his name in response. As Daniel felt his body reacting even more to her close proximity, he let her go rather abruptly.

What the hell was he doing, molesting his nephew’s babysitter? The same babysitter who would be on a plane back to New York the first chance she got?

“Sorry. I should get back to work,” he said awkwardly.

Bobby babbled something nearby. Willa glanced back at the boy, then said, “Um, the shirt?”

Daniel realized he still had it in his grip. He handed it over. “Shit. Now it’s all wrinkled. Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just—oh, I should get to Bobby.”

Daniel watched her hurry back to her charge. He wondered for the thousandth time how she’d react if he kissed her. He’d seen desire in her eyes only moments earlier. He might not be an absolute expert on the nuances of women, but he knew when a woman wanted something physical from him.

Did he dare pursue a relationship with Willa? It didn’t have to be anything more than sex, of course. Considering Willa didn’t want to stick around, he wondered if she would agree to such an arrangement. It would certainly be simple to make it official since she basically lived in his house these days. She’d

finally given up her neglected room at the bed and breakfast last week after coming back from her overnight to New York.

It helped that Willa was the opposite of Caroline. She wouldn't want his money, and she already knew he only had so much time and attention to offer her. She was a practical girl, despite all her talk about wanting to be a starving artist in the big city.

Daniel returned to work, pushing himself until he was able to clear his mind of all thoughts of Willa and having her in his bed. He worked until he was dripping in sweat and the mosquitoes started to buzz around him in droves. He felt a bite at the back of his neck. Slapping at it, he knew he couldn't avoid Willa forever.

And maybe if he had some luck, he could convince her that the two of them could be something more than friends.



## FOURTEEN

Willa was looking forward to attending girls' night with DeeDee and some other women at DeeDee's place on Saturday. On Thursday, however, DeeDee called her with bad news.

"Dougie and his friends are watching football that night, and he says he has the house for it, not me. I told him there was no way I would've agreed, but he's right, damn him! It's on the family calendar. I just wasn't paying attention."

"So we'll reschedule?"

"No, I was thinking that we could do it at your place. Or Daniel's, to be exact. I haven't been out to the Gunns' in forever, but I remember it being a great place for groups of people. So pretty and homey, you know. And of course, I'll help you get ready. I have all the food, drinks, everything. You won't have to buy a thing!"

Willa felt a little frisson of anxiety bloom inside her. She was hardly the party-throwing type. The simple idea of going to DeeDee's to meet with women she didn't know had been terrifying—yet exciting, too. Having them all here at Daniel's? That was something else entirely.

"I'm not sure Daniel will agree. I mean, I'd have to ask him. It's his house, not mine."

"Of course, darlin'. Lemme know what he says!"

Expecting to receive a swift denial, Willa stared at Daniel in shock when he agreed without a fight.

“Are you sure?” said Willa for what seemed like the thousandth time. “It’ll be a lot of people. And kids. Even though it’s supposed to be no kids, I don’t know how many are going to be able to get babysitters if the dads are watching football and the moms are here.”

“It’ll be fine. I can watch Bobby so you can focus on your guests.”

Daniel smiled at her, the smile going straight to her heart. She remembered the feeling of his arms around her when he’d caught her during their laundry interlude. She’d been certain he’d kiss her then, but she’d been wrong.

She didn’t know how to interpret his agreement to DeeDee’s party, but Willa didn’t push the point.

By Saturday, Willa and DeeDee were in full party mode: they’d been cooking up all kinds of finger foods—sausages wrapped in bacon, cheese dip, salsa and chips, beans and rice with peppers from DeeDee’s garden—and making a huge bowl of sangria for the adults and lemonade for the kids.

Daniel cleaned the house while the women worked. DeeDee remarked, “A man who can use a vacuum? Be still my beatin’ heart!”

Willa giggled. “He even puts the toilet seat down,” she whispered.

DeeDee looked so astonished that Willa burst into belly laughs that would creep back periodically through the afternoon.

All laughter was forgotten, though, when the guests started arriving. Women that DeeDee had known since elementary school filled the living room, a number of them bringing their kids along. Marcia, a petite redhead with two boys, playfully scolded DeeDee for scheduling this party when their menfolk were busy watching football.

“Gordon is my babysitter, you know!” Marcia said with a laugh, holding up her large glass of sangria and taking a hearty swallow. “Dang, this stuff is good. Did you make it, DeeDee? I thought your specialty was mint juleps?”

DeeDee pointed to Willa. “That sangria is all hers, baby. This woman can make a mean glass of that stuff.”

Willa smiled with pride. Although she was somewhat overwhelmed by all the people and noise, the women were friendly and inclined to include her in their conversations. It wasn't like the awkward parties Willa had attended a few times with Stacey and Robert, where everyone ignored her because she didn't have a glamorous job. She'd always told herself she didn't care about what other people thought of her. She knew she was a misfit, and she wasn't going to go out of her way to force herself to fit in, but even in high school she'd been jealous of the girls who traveled in groups and always had someone to eat with in the cafeteria. Sitting here now, with DeeDee and her friends, she finally understood what it was like to be part of the group.

Daniel was the only man around, and he told Willa he'd keep Bobby outside on the porch so he wouldn't be underfoot. A few other small children around Bobby's age joined Bobby outside to play. Willa just hoped Daniel didn't get overwhelmed looking after a bunch of preschoolers. He'd joked that the dogs could keep the rugrats rounded up and out of trouble just as easy as they could herd the cows on the farm. Easier, even.

Daniel still tended to get impatient with Bobby. It wasn't that he was ever mean to the little guy—Willa knew he was too level-headed and kind to do such a thing—but when Bobby clung to Willa or refused to do anything he said, she could see the frustration in his face. Bobby still threw tantrums, especially when he was extra tired. During those, you couldn't do anything but wait until the storm passed.

Daniel always wanted to stop the tantrums mid-scream. He wanted to fix the problem and move on. He had yet to accept Willa's pronouncement that it was easier to let Bobby scream for a time and get out whatever anger or frustration might be plaguing him. After the little boy had let it all out, he'd calm down, and whatever had been annoying him would be forgotten.

“How’s it going, living out here?” said Marcia after she’d yelled at her five-year-old son Connor to stop giving his little brother wedgies. “I can’t imagine how you’ve been coping with everything, and Bobby, too.” She clucked her tongue in sympathy.

“It’s going as well as you’d think.” Willa shrugged. “I can’t leave Bobby until he’s settled, and I’m the one person left to him who was around when his parents were alive.”

“Well, getting stuck with Daniel Gunn out here in his farmhouse?” Marcia’s eyes sparkled. “I can’t say that I feel too sorry for you.”

“Marcia! Don’t listen to her. She’ll make eyes at anything that’s male and has all his teeth,” said DeeDee with a laugh.

“Daniel Gunn is a fine piece of man, and everybody knows it. I can’t blame you for keeping him all to yourself, Willa.”

Despite how much she’d been thinking about it lately, Willa blushed, denying that they had any kind of relationship like *that*, and then she heard a screech from outside. She winced. It sounded exactly like Bobby when he was about to throw an epic temper tantrum.

“I should go check on Bobby—”

“Wait a moment, darlin’. His uncle can take care of him.” DeeDee shot her a look that said volumes.

Willa sat back down, but when she heard the screeching get louder, she ignored DeeDee’s remonstrance. She found Bobby on his belly, kicking and screaming as Daniel stood over him, and wished she’d gotten out here sooner to nip the tantrum in the bud.

“What happened?”

“One of the boys stole his fire truck from him,” said Daniel. He crouched down and said, “Bobby, there’s no reason to cry like this. You have plenty of other toys to play with.”

Bobby kicked his legs harder, hitting the wood flooring of the porch so hard that Willa could feel the vibrations under her own feet. His screeching was liable to wake the dead, too.

When Bobby refused to listen to Daniel, he got up, shaking his head. “It’s no use. He ain’t stopping for me.”

“You just have to wait out the storm,” said Willa.

Daniel didn’t look convinced. Bobby now turned over onto his back and wailed to the sky. He kept screaming the word, “Mine!” over and over again.

A few of the parents had come outside because of the noise, but when they realized it wasn’t their child making the racket, they left well enough alone.

“Did he start screaming just because another kid stole his truck?” said Willa. This tantrum seemed especially long for something like that.

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. “I told him he needed to share, or he’d get a spanking. He didn’t want to share his toys. Shouldn’t he be old enough to know better by now?”

Willa wanted to bash her head against the nearest wall. Did Daniel think Bobby was a ten-year-old instead of a preschooler? He could share his toys, yes, but he didn’t totally understand why it mattered, yet. And a spanking? She’d been so preoccupied with everything else that she’d never thought to tell Daniel that Stacey had forbidden spankings since day one.

“Bobby doesn’t know what a spanking is,” explained Willa. “More than likely, you scared him.”

He looked incredulous. “He doesn’t know what a spanking is? No wonder he’s like this! He just needs a good whooping. That’ll set him right straight.”

Willa caught Daniel by the arm before he could go inside and grab a wooden spoon or something. “I know things are different out here, but spankings are not the way it’s done anymore. Stacey hated them. It took Robert a little time to come around, but he eventually agreed. They would be really upset if you spanked their son, Daniel.”

Daniel suddenly looked embarrassed, uncertain. He glanced at Bobby—who had finally stopped screaming and instead

sniffled and whined—as if the kid were a live grenade about to go off.

Willa felt frustration rising. Daniel acted like caring for a young child was some impossible task. She'd learned quickly after Stacey had hired her. She'd had to. She'd needed the money, and she'd wanted to do a good job. Why was this so hard for Daniel, then? He was a smart guy. He was trying, she admitted, albeit grudgingly.

Daniel broke into her thoughts. “Why is it that I always feel like I’m doing the wrong thing with him?” he said, shaking his head. “It’s like everything you’ve been telling me has been in Chinese or something, and I don’t have a translator.”

“It takes time. You’ll learn. How many people have kids and bring them home, only to think, ‘I have no idea what I’m doing’? Pretty much every single one, the first time it happens.”

Before Daniel could try to get her to watch Bobby—she wouldn’t put it past him—Willa returned inside to her party. Maybe it was mean to leave him out there with all those small children, including a certain preschooler who was certainly reliving some of his Terrible Twos, but Daniel needed to get it together. She might have resigned herself to staying a little longer, but she wouldn’t be here indefinitely. Bobby was Daniel’s responsibility, and he needed to figure out how to handle that. With or without her.

## FIFTEEN

Daniel made notes in the accounting ledger, something his own father had done for the farm before he had taken it over. He had all the fancy computer software he could use, but there was nothing like taking a pencil and calculator and doing the numbers himself. He'd input them into his accounting software later on, anyway, but this made Daniel feel like he was really taking in each number and understanding where all the bits and pieces came and went.

"Daniel, it's two o'clock," said Willa over his shoulder.

Daniel had been working in his office since eleven a.m. without more than a break for coffee. It took his brain a second to remember why two o'clock was significant.

"I need to work on my project. You said you'd watch Bobby."

Yes, that was the reason why. Willa had explained that the art gallery in New York had agreed to do another part of her interview long-distance, so she didn't have to fly to New York and back, and she had to put together something that involved graphic design.

"Right, sorry. I didn't forget, just lost track of time. Could you give me just another fifteen minutes so I can finish this?"

She looked as if she wanted to say no, but then sighing, she nodded. "I put together a pillow fort that you can play in with Bobby while I work. He's really gotten into building things. He's been in a good mood, so he shouldn't be too much trouble. I'd like to be able to work on this project without

interruption.” She smiled wryly. “It’s hard to get things done when you have someone constantly over your shoulder.”

She closed his door, but Daniel couldn’t concentrate after all that. He appreciated that she’d gone to the trouble of setting up an activity for Bobby, but a pillow fort? That sounded like a huge mess that no one would ever clean up. Pillows didn’t go on the floor, anyway. The thought of pillows and blankets scattered across the house was enough to get Daniel to abandon his accounting to go straight to the living room.

“I appreciate you going to the trouble of putting this all together,” he said as he began to fold a blanket he’d picked up from the floor, “but I’d prefer not to have all this stuff thrown everywhere.”

Willa stared at him before she frowned. “It’s just a pillow fort.”

“Pillows are for using on furniture, not building forts.”

Bobby, for his part, was happily playing with what looked like a hair tie, entirely ignoring the fort in question.

“I’d rather do something else with Bobby,” insisted Daniel.

Willa rolled her eyes. “You can do whatever you’d like with your nephew. I have work to get done.” She kissed Bobby on the head before she went to the guest room she was using now. Although she didn’t slam the door shut, Daniel could tell she’d wanted to throw something at his head.

Well, she’d have to get used to it. This was his house, dammit, and he made the rules. He wanted his stuff where he wanted his stuff. Was that so bad? Most women would thank the heavens that a man cared about keeping things neat and tidy.

“Let’s play with your new Army guys.” Daniel took out the bucket of green plastic men. They were the same ones he and Robert had played with when they’d been kids.

Bobby played with the army men for a little bit, but he was soon drawn to the pillow fort. Taking a handful of the plastic soldiers with him, he crawled through the fort’s entrance, saying, “Come with me, Uncle Danny!”



As he peered inside the fort and watched Bobby play, Daniel didn't have the heart to stop him. Unfolding the blanket he'd placed on the end of the couch, he draped it over the top of the fort before he squeezed through the entrance to join him.

"What are we doing in here?" whispered Daniel. It was dim enough that it seemed like an appropriate place to whisper.

"Playing soldiers," said Bobby as if it were obvious.

Normally, Daniel had a tendency to glance at the time, waiting for Willa to reappear when he was caring for Bobby on his own, but this time, he didn't even notice how long they'd been playing. Bobby didn't throw any fits. He only grew frustrated twice, and Daniel found he could easily redirect the boy's attention.

By the time Willa peeked inside the fort and asked how it had gone, Daniel could say he'd enjoyed his time with his nephew. It wasn't that he didn't love Bobby, but up until this point, the boy had been more work than play. Daniel had only ever worried he was doing something wrong, or that Bobby would start screaming, or something would go ass over teakettle and Willa would need to swoop in and clean up his mess.

"Did you get your project done?" he asked Willa once the two had emerged from the fort.

"I got a good chunk of it done, thanks. So, you liked the pillow fort after all?" Willa's grin was enough to ease any annoyance Daniel had felt about her throwing pillows everywhere. But he realized that even though he'd taken care of Bobby this afternoon, he'd still needed Willa to arrange the afternoon. The fort had been her idea, hadn't it? It felt like she knew what Bobby needed on a level Daniel didn't think he could achieve.

He saw Bobby yawn, the little eyes heavy. Before Willa could take him, Daniel picked him up and said, "How about a little rest, buddy?"

Bobby didn't always need a nap, and up until now, when he *was* tired, Daniel usually left it to Willa to handle, only because Bobby tended to fret and ask for her regardless. It often ended up being a battle between wanting the boy to go to

sleep easily versus not giving in to his every whim. Daniel had always known that young kids like Bobby were a handful, but he hadn't known the half of it. Preschoolers could bring down an adult male like himself within a few hours if they put their minds to it.

Daniel laid Bobby in his bed. Bobby sat up immediately, his lower lip wobbling. "I want Willa," he mumbled as his face screwed up.

"Time for a little rest. Let's close the blinds." Daniel ignored Bobby's wobbly lower lip as the room dimmed. He held his breath, expecting Bobby to burst into tears at any moment.

But when Daniel returned to the bed, he saw that Bobby had lain down, a teddy bear clutched close. Daniel rubbed the boy's back until the sleepy eyelids closed.

Triumph filled him as Bobby fell asleep. He wanted to shout with joy, maybe even beat on his chest like men did when their favorite football team won the Super Bowl. He had put Bobby to bed, and the tot hadn't thrown a fit, either!

"Is he sleeping?" said Willa when Daniel returned to the living room.

Daniel ignored her skeptical tone. "Yup, he fell asleep without any trouble."

"Oh. Well, that's great." She smiled. "You're getting the hang of this parenting thing."

Willa had already started cleaning up the fort, and Daniel felt guilty for getting so annoyed at her earlier. As Daniel placed one of the cushions back onto the couch, Willa laid a folded blanket over the arm of the couch. Their hands connected for a millisecond, and Daniel felt the touch throughout his body. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. To his amusement, a blush colored Willa's cheeks from that mere brush of hands.

He thought of how he'd held her in his arms just days ago when Willa had chased after the laundry. The sudden urge to repeat that moment was almost too much temptation to avoid. It didn't help that Willa had left her hair down, and it tumbled around her shoulders in riotous chocolate curls.

“I should start dinner,” blurted Willa, effectively breaking the moment.

When she hurried away, Daniel sighed inwardly. He might be getting the hang of this parenting thing, but when it came to Willa, he was still a complete greenhorn.

But then again, every day he became more confident in caring for Bobby meant a day closer to Willa riding off into the sunrise. He suddenly felt torn between his pride in himself for learning how to care for his nephew and wanting Willa to stay as long as possible. Somewhere between Willa showing up on the porch with his nephew and now, she’d started to feel less like the nanny and more like someone he genuinely wanted to be around. He wished he could have both, but in his experience, the universe was never that kind. He’d learned that the day his parents had died.

## SIXTEEN

Willa's eyes were bleary as she glanced at the time. How was it already time for lunch? Stretching, she groaned as her back popped.

She'd been working on this stupid website design for Grayson since nine a.m. that morning without a break. Right then, she felt her stomach growl, and she realized how hungry she was. She probably should've had more than a cup of coffee for breakfast.

After the fort incident, Willa had felt more confident in Daniel's ability to care for Bobby without her. Until the next day, when she'd asked him to watch Bobby so she could run some errands and had returned to find Bobby running around unsupervised in the barn while Daniel had been in the hayloft.

Daniel had assured her that he'd still been able to keep an eye on Bobby, but Willa had been horrified. What if Bobby had gotten into one of the stalls and a horse had kicked him? Or if he'd tried to play with any of the sharp tools lying around the barn? Or tried to climb the ladder to the loft?

Willa had had some choice words for Daniel, and they'd only resolved the argument later that evening after Bobby had gone to bed.

Today, Willa had been adamant with Daniel: no leaving Bobby alone in the barn or the kitchen, another place where the boy always managed to get into heaps of trouble. Daniel had agreed and told her she wouldn't be disturbed as long as she was working.

Now she really needed to check in with Daniel and Bobby. Despite Daniel's novice mistakes and his initial defensiveness, he'd listened to her and had agreed with her. Overall, she trusted him.

She admired that quality in Daniel, that he listened. It took a mature man to hear criticism and accept that he'd made a mistake. That quality gave Willa hope Daniel would become a good parent for Bobby once he'd fully learned the ropes.

Someone knocked on the office door, and then she heard Daniel say, "Can I come in?"

Willa opened the door. "I was just about to get some lunch, actually."

Smiling, Daniel lifted up a green plastic lunchbox. "I made you lunch. I thought you could use it."

Taking the lunchbox, she opened it to see that Daniel had made her a sandwich—turkey on rye with mustard, her favorite—along with apple slices, sweet potato chips, and a pudding cup. The sandwich was cut into triangles, just the way she liked it. She'd forgotten that she'd told Daniel she liked her sandwich cut into triangles, not rectangles, and he'd joked that he didn't care what food looked like as long as it tasted good.

"Oh, thank you. This looks great," she said, her heart fluttering in her throat. "I'm starving."

"I meant to put a brownie in there, but I didn't realize we were out of them, so pudding it is."

It was ridiculous, but Willa felt tears well up in her eyes. She'd always been the one who'd made lunches for people: for her dad, for Bobby. She couldn't remember the last time someone had done something so simple, yet kind, for her.

"Well, I'll let you get back to it. I need to get some work done outside," Daniel said.

"No, it's okay," replied Willa, surprising both herself and Daniel. Before she could lose her nerve, she added, "Stay and have lunch with me. I needed to take a break, anyway."

“Then I’ll make myself something, and we’ll eat in the living room. That work?”

When they sat down together on the couch—Bobby was napping at the moment—Willa felt butterflies in her stomach the whole time she was eating her lunch. It was ridiculous, considering how many times she’d been alone with Daniel. But his making her this lunch the way he had only reinforced how attracted she was to him.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye, noting every movement he made. When she reached for a napkin on the coffee table at the same time Daniel did, she almost knocked over her glass of water in her haste to avoid touching him.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to touch him: it was the opposite. She wanted to touch him so badly that she knew if she did, it wouldn’t end with just a brush of their fingers the way it had the last time.

They ate without saying a word. Willa felt the silence like a blade hanging over her. Had she made a mistake in asking Daniel to stay? But if he hadn’t wanted to stay, he would’ve said no—right? Her insides twisted into knots, and she could barely swallow the sandwich he’d made for her, the sandwich that he’d cut up for her just the way she liked simply because he’d wanted to.

They finished eating, and Willa struggled to find the words to express her gratitude. It seemed silly, considering it was just a sandwich, but it felt bigger than that.

“Thank you for making my lunch,” she said finally, knowing the words were paltry compared to what she was currently feeling.

“You’re welcome.”

She gazed into his eyes, and before she could rethink the decision, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. As she pulled back again, she saw his eyes open wide in surprise.

“The sandwich—” She swallowed hard. “I can’t remember the last time someone made me lunch.”

Daniel's gaze darkened. He cupped her cheek, the calluses on his palm in marked contrast to the gentleness of his touch.

"Willa," was all he said before he kissed her—on the mouth, this time.

His lips were soft, but his kiss was anything but soft. He kissed her like a man with a mission, and Willa could only clutch at Daniel's shoulders and hang on. The kiss deepened until she forgot everything else but him.

She hadn't known just how good it would feel to kiss Daniel Gunn until this very moment.

"Willa!" called Bobby from his room. "Willaaaaa!"

Willa broke the kiss, her face flaming. She'd told herself she wouldn't get involved with Daniel, and here she was, kissing him in his living room!

"I should go get Bobby," she said, but Daniel stopped her.

"Wait. What just happened—?" He pushed his fingers through his hair, disheveling it. "I didn't mean to do that."

Willa winced, even though she'd been thinking the same thing. That desire blooming in her belly? It dissipated like a deflated balloon within a second.

"I mean, it shouldn't have happened, because you're going back to New York, and I'm staying here," added Daniel. "It would be confusing for Bobby ... because he might think you're staying forever."

Willa smiled sadly. "I'm not sure he has that much understanding of the situation, but I get what you're saying." Feeling humiliated, confused, and maybe a tad irritated, she got up from the couch before she could say something she regretted.

This time, Daniel didn't try to stop her.

"Willa!" said Bobby when she opened his bedroom door. He was standing at the foot of his bed, an assortment of stuffed animals lined up before him.

“I’m here.” She reached out for his hand. “Did you have a good sleep?”

He nodded. “I’m hungry.” Willa laughed.

At least preschoolers were straightforward. It was adult males she didn’t understand, not one bit. Daniel kept doing such nice gestures for her, but then after he’d kissed her, he’d acted like she was nothing more than the hired help.

What did he even want from her?

Her frown deepened when she returned to the living room to see Daniel gone. At least he’d cleaned up after lunch, she thought in annoyance. But did the man have to run away from her now?

“I’m hungry!” said Bobby again.

“What do you want for lunch? A turkey sandwich?”

“I want ketchup,” said Bobby in all seriousness.

That answer made her laugh, and it was enough for Willa to forget all about Daniel Gunn—for now.



## SEVENTEEN

Daniel swore as the hay bailer made a choking noise and then stopped dead. Opening up the engine compartment, he coughed when smoke floated upward. Why did this have to happen now when he needed to have bailed this hay days ago?

No stranger to fixing machines that refused to work, he began to tinker with the hay bailer's guts, hoping it was something simple to fix. But after almost an hour of trying everything he could think of, the hay bailer refused to work.

Daniel wiped the sweat from his forehead. He'd been working out in the fields since early morning, and today was another scorcher. Despite the heat and humidity, he preferred it to being in the house with Willa underfoot. He didn't trust himself to behave when she was close by.

That kiss yesterday had knocked Daniel off his feet. He'd had a feeling for a long time now that kissing Willa Markson would be pleasurable, but he hadn't expected to feel like he'd been consumed by fire in the process. He'd wanted that kiss to go on and on as he stripped Willa of her clothes and touched her skin, her breasts, her legs—

He pushed those thoughts aside. He'd been right to tell her that nothing could ever happen between them. Willa would want something serious, and he couldn't give her that. It wouldn't be fair to her if he pursued something. Besides, she wasn't going to stay here in Texas, even if he did want something serious. Why get them both into some complicated mess when they both knew the stakes?

Logically, it all made sense why he'd told her it wouldn't happen again. His practical side patted him on the shoulder and assured him he'd done the right thing.

His libido, however, told him he was the biggest idiot alive. And Daniel was afraid that his libido would win out over practicality, this round.

But before he could afford the luxury of thinking about Willa or about whether or not he should kiss her, he needed to fix this damn hay bailer. Realizing he'd need to go inside the house to find the instruction manual—Daniel kept all instruction manuals in a folder in his office and had done so since he'd been a teenager—he steeled himself.

He knew he could see Willa and not touch her. He had that much self-control—or so he wanted to believe.

Willa and Bobby were busy playing in the living room, and he greeted them briefly before going to his office. He found the hay bailer manual fairly quickly, although he grimaced when he saw how thick it was. He didn't have time to sit around reading some manual when he had hay to bail.

"Just needed this," he said as he walked past Bobby and Willa again. "I'll be outside for the rest of the afternoon."

"Oh, then I'll take Bobby outside to play. It's not as hot as it was yesterday," said Willa.

Daniel grunted. He just hoped the two of them stayed away from him because he didn't need any distractions. No matter how tempting Willa might be.

Daniel sat down in the shade of the porch and flipped through the manual, trying to figure out what it was he needed to fix in the first place. He heard the front door open and close, and he watched as Willa and Bobby went to a shady spot near the barn to play. It was about fifty yards from where Daniel would be working—not close enough that Bobby would get underfoot, but close enough that he could watch them out of the corner of his eye.

Daniel walked back out to the field and placed the manual on the grass as he began to tinker with the engine itself. He

became so engrossed in his work, he didn't hear anyone approach, and it was only when he heard the sound of something ripping that he looked down to see Bobby tearing pages out of the heavy manual as he tried to pick it up.

"Oh, Bobby!" Willa panted as she crouched down next to the boy. "We have to be careful with this."

"I wanna read it with Uncle Danny!" Bobby said as pieces of the manual floated away in the breeze.

Daniel immediately began to collect the pieces, quickly discovering that Bobby had ripped out the part of the manual he needed to fix the hay bailer. And considering that the hay bailer was so old, it would be unlikely he'd be able to find the manual on the internet.

"This probably isn't the kind of story you want to read, buddy. Here, let me help." Willa took the mangled manual from Bobby before saying to Daniel, "I'm so sorry. I tried to keep him away, but he's been itching to see what you were doing all afternoon. I turned my back for a second, and he ran straight over here."

Daniel sighed. "Not your fault. I think I got all the pieces."

"Let me help you tape it up. Come on, Bobby. Let's go inside and help your uncle."

Daniel had expected Bobby to throw a fit when Willa had taken the manual from him, but the boy only nodded sadly as the three of them returned to the house. Daniel hoped that he'd gotten most of the torn pieces; otherwise, he didn't know how he'd fix the hay bailer today. He'd have to find somebody to fix it for him, and he didn't want to spend money if he didn't have to.

"Bobby, you play with your toys while I help Uncle Daniel, okay? Here's the tape." Willa let out a giggle that stopped short when she saw the pile of paper on the coffee table. "Oh, dear. What a mess!"

"You could say that again," he said wryly.

"Well, we can fix this. Here, let's get the biggest pieces first."

They began putting the paper puzzle together, filling the room with the sounds of tearing off tape and of Bobby talking to his toys and to Willa. As Daniel leaned down to tape two bottom pieces together, he found himself inhaling a whiff of Willa's hair. She smelled like strawberries, and if he were to be honest with himself, he figured the smell of strawberries would arouse him long after Willa had gone back to New York.

As they worked, Daniel felt his body grow warmer, the sexual tension obvious to anyone with two eyes. How did Willa manage to be so sexy when all she was doing was taping pieces of paper together? He marveled that he found her attractive no matter what she did.

God Almighty, he wanted her. The thought filled him. He wanted her in his bed, and he knew she wanted him, too. And why shouldn't they indulge themselves? They were both adults, they were both unattached, and if he were honest with Willa about not wanting something serious from the very beginning, what was the harm?

At this point, Bobby had abandoned his toys to watch the proceedings. When Willa stuck a piece of tape on his hand, he giggled, pulling it off.

Daniel had just taped the last piece when he and Willa looked at the result—and it was disastrous. Somehow, they'd managed to tape pieces of odd pages together, and now that he looked closer, he could see some were upside-down. How had that happened?

Willa's lip trembled, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Normally, Daniel would be annoyed that he'd wasted time on something like this. But the situation was so ridiculous he started laughing.

And when Bobby stuck his piece of tape in Willa's hair, Daniel started laughing so hard tears came to his eyes.

"Ack, Bobby! Where did you put that piece of tape?" Willa tried to get the tape from the back of her head, which made Bobby and Daniel laugh some more.

Finally, Daniel stopped her and turned her around. "I'll get it." He parted her curls, loving how silky soft they were, and gently pulled the tape away. He took in the scent of her hair again before reluctantly handing her the piece of tape. "Here you go."

Willa turned so she was facing Daniel, which made it so only a few inches separated them. Daniel watched a light flush climb her cheeks. He took in the rise and fall of her luscious breasts, how glassy her eyes were, and how she licked her lips. If Bobby weren't right there, he'd kiss her a second time and damn the consequences.

"I'm sorry about your manual," said Willa ruefully as she scooted away. "I'm not sure we made it any better."

"It doesn't matter. I'll call somebody about the hay bailer."

Daniel knew he must be far gone not to care about the manual he'd tried to save or about spending money on a repair job.

And as he watched Willa play with Bobby on the floor, he decided he could see this attraction through without anyone getting hurt. If he knew the stakes and Willa knew them, too, then they'd both simply enjoy each other as long as the affair lasted.

With that thought in mind, Daniel smiled, looking forward to when he could finally get Willa Markson underneath him and moaning his name.

## EIGHTEEN

“Bobby, honey, you need to go to sleep,” said Willa as she rubbed Bobby’s back.

Bobby shook his head. “Not tired,” he kept repeating even as his eyelids got heavier.

“Yes, you are, and I am, too.” She sighed. She’d put Bobby to bed an hour ago, but when he’d started crying, she’d stayed with him to see if she could lull him to sleep. But he was still awake and refusing to let his eyes close.

“Not tired ...” Bobby mumbled the words as he yawned.

Finally, his eyes closed, and Willa held her breath, waiting. When his breathing slowed and his eyes stayed closed, she let out a sigh of relief.

She went to the guest room, exhausted but triumphant. She glanced at the clock on the wall—it was only seven p.m. Far too early for her to go to sleep herself.

She heard Daniel in the kitchen, and her exhaustion immediately disappeared. Taping that manual together today had been the most sexually charged experience of her life—taping a manual! She shook her head in wonder. And then, when Daniel had touched her hair, she’d only thought of him kissing her yesterday.

Desire burned in her belly. She’d wished that he’d kissed her again, even with Bobby staring at them both. She’d never known she could want a man the way she did Daniel Gunn.

Willa had dated, of course, and she'd lost her virginity in high school in the back of her boyfriend's beat-up pickup. But sex had always felt more like a chore than a necessity to her. Willa had better luck doing the job herself than relying on a man to give her an orgasm.

So it surprised her now that she wanted to sleep with Daniel as much as she did. Her intuition seemed to be telling her he was different: He wouldn't fumble around for a few minutes before the sex began, lasting no more than ten minutes, tops. He'd kissed her like he had all the time in the world. The sex could only be equally good.

Willa put her hands up to her burning cheeks. Did she dare? He'd said he wouldn't touch her again, but was it because he didn't want to, or because he thought he shouldn't? She knew the answer immediately, given the burning desire in his gaze this afternoon.

Before she lost her nerve, she got up and went to the living room, only to find Daniel sitting on the couch as if he'd been waiting for her.

Their gazes collided, heat sparking between them even though they were still a fair distance apart. Daniel rose and approached her, and Willa couldn't help comparing him to some jungle cat prowling toward her.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Willa didn't want to talk right now. She just wanted to feel. Standing on her tiptoes, she grabbed him by his collar, pulled him in, and kissed him.

He stilled for a moment, but then he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. Willa moaned as Daniel deepened the kiss, raking his fingers through her hair. She could already feel his hardness against her belly. She shivered, nipping at his bottom lip.

"Are you sure about this?" he rasped, only to kiss her throat and lick at her collarbone. "Because if you tell me to stop now, I won't touch you again."

"Wasn't I the one who kissed you?"

Daniel's lips quirked. "Good point." Then he swooped down and lifted her up like she was no heavier than a bag of feathers.

"Bobby?" said Daniel as he set Willa onto his bed after shoving his bedroom door closed behind them.

"He's asleep."

"Thank God."

This time Daniel kissed her, and Willa could only surrender to the sensations taking over her body. She felt like a crazy person, she wanted Daniel so much. She was close to ripping off her own clothes and his, and she'd never felt like that before. Sex had always been so ... routine for her. Never frenzied.

Willa knew this was temporary, and she told herself it didn't matter. It was worth it. As Daniel pulled her shirt off and cupped her breasts, she tipped her head back and moaned.

No, she didn't care one bit about stupid things like consequences or feelings or anything. She just wanted Daniel—here, now, fast and furious.

"You're gorgeous, you know that?" Daniel said as he brushed his thumb over one of her nipples.

Willa laughed, a little self-consciously. "I think 'pretty when I try hard' is what I am."

His voice rough, he answered, "No, you're beautiful. I thought you were, the first second I saw you."

Willa couldn't breathe, especially when Daniel deftly unhooked her bra and began to kiss and caress her bare breasts. She'd had no idea her breasts could be this sensitive. When he took one hardened peak into his mouth, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out so loudly that she'd risk waking Bobby.

"I wanted you, too," she admitted. When Daniel looked up at her, his gaze dark, she caressed his cheek. "I thought you were so sexy in those Wranglers you wear."



She giggled as he blushed a little. Suddenly growling, he flipped her onto her stomach as he finished undressing her. Normally, she'd be self-conscious about her body—her butt too big, her tummy too soft—but Daniel made her believe she was truly beautiful.

He kissed down her spine as he kneaded her ass. Willa felt heat bloom in her core, and she knew if he touched her there, he'd find her wet and wanting already.

His callused fingers parted her legs, and Willa arched into his touch. Caressing her sex, Daniel growled deep in his throat as he made her desperate for him. It only took another brush of his finger against her sensitive bud, and release slammed into her so hard she couldn't catch her breath.

Willa flipped onto her back, panting, as she watched Daniel strip out of his clothes. He was all muscles, his pectorals and abdomen spectacular to behold. Sitting up, she caressed him, loving how he responded to her touch.

Feeling bold, she unbuckled his belt and pushed his jeans down until she could reach inside his boxers. She wrapped her fingers around his length, her heart fluttering as she realized how large he was.

“Dammit, Willa,” he groaned as she stroked him. “I’m not going to last long if you keep doing that.”

She laughed. She was almost tempted to keep going to watch him lose control, but he batted her hand aside before sheathing himself in a condom.

Soon they were both naked and tangled together on the bed. Kissing her deeply, Daniel pushed inside her in one stroke that Willa felt all the way to her toes. She clutched at his shoulders as he began to thrust.

She felt that she'd been tossed into a stormy sea and couldn't find her bearings, but she knew if she held onto Daniel, she'd be all right. More than all right—magnificent. Astounding.

“Don't stop,” she panted as she felt a second orgasm building inside her.

Daniel grunted something and sped up his pace. Willa's eyes rolled back into her head as the wave hit her. Trembling, she wrapped her arms around Daniel. Soon, Daniel yelled out his satisfaction, thrusting a last time before collapsing next to Willa on the bed, careful not to crush her.

Willa gasped for breath. Her entire body was burning up, her bones melting into putty. As she turned onto her side, Daniel did, too, and her heart clenched as she looked into his eyes.

Had she really told herself she could sleep with him without feelings? Right that second, she felt as vulnerable as a newborn, and she was afraid Daniel could see it in her eyes.

But her luck won out. As Daniel's gaze poured into her eyes, his breathing deepened, and his eyelids grew heavy, and before long, he was asleep as if he didn't have a care in the world. Willa stayed awake, watching him sleep for a while longer until she rose and returned to her own room.

It was better this way, she reasoned. Sleeping in the same bed was something people in a relationship did, not casual lovers. And what if Bobby woke before them and found them together in Daniel's bed? The last thing she needed was to confuse the little boy.

Curling into a ball, Willa stared at nothing for a while until sleep claimed her, too.

## NINETEEN

“You’re in a good mood,” observed Uncle James, leaning back in his leather executive chair the following morning. He lifted an eyebrow when Daniel tried—and failed—not to smile. “In a *really* good mood. Now I’m worried.”

Daniel had awoken in the middle of the night to find Willa gone, returned to her room, but he hadn’t taken it personally. He’d been disappointed he hadn’t been able to reach for her and enjoy a second round of amazing sex right then and there, of course, but he was practical enough to understand why she’d gone back to the guest room.

That morning, she’d blushed bright red when they’d met in the kitchen, and since Bobby hadn’t woken up yet, Daniel had kissed her until the beeping coffee pot had made them part.

“You make it sound like I’m always in a bad mood,” said Daniel from the chair on the other side of Uncle James’s massive oak desk. Daniel had gone to his uncle’s office right after breakfast without calling him first. He’d wanted to start the ball rolling without delay.

“Boy, you can’t stop grinnin’ like a fool.” Uncle James frowned. “Does this have to do with the little lady? Daniel Gunn, if you so much as laid a finger on her—”

Daniel snorted. “Willa doesn’t need you to be her knight in shining armor. She’s hardly a kid. She’s a grown woman who can make her own decisions.”

Uncle James wagged a finger. “Don’t matter. She’s a lady, and she deserves your respect. I’d hate to see you hurt her.” He

leveled a stern gaze. “Because then I’d have to take you out back and shoot you.”

“What about me? What if she hurts *me*?”

“Now I know you’re being stupid.” Uncle James sighed. “Well, what’s done is done, I guess. Why are you here with me this early, then? I doubt I’m the one you want to spend your time with.”

Lying awake and alone in the middle of the night, he’d thought long and hard. He’d told himself that this *thing* between them would be temporary, but he’d seen how Willa had looked at him. She’d looked at him like a woman who wanted to stay, who wanted more than just a quick affair—no matter how great the sex might be.

Daniel’s mind had turned furiously as he worked to come up with a plan to keep her in Texas. If he made her life easier in multiple ways, wouldn’t she be crazy to go back to New York?

Besides, New York was expensive, and he knew Willa wasn’t flush with cash. Even if she got this job, would it pay enough for a decently sized apartment there? He doubted it. She’d probably end up living in some dump with a bunch of strangers and still struggle to pay her bills. At least here, she could save money and live cheaply.

And... she’d stay where *he* lived. That was the most important thing.

“I want you to add Willa as a tenant on the farm,” said Daniel.

“You want her to start paying you rent or something?”

“No, the opposite. She won’t pay me a dime, but I know she’d want it in writing. She’s that type of woman. Then she can get her mail sent to the house and get a Texas driver’s license.”

“Danny boy, have you plumb lost your mind? The little lady told you a million times she’s going to skedaddle back to New York the first chance she gets. Didn’t you tell me she just went there for some interview? What if she gets this job? You think she’s going to say no to that and stay here?” Uncle James frowned deeply, his mustache quivering. “This ain’t a good idea, son.”

Daniel crossed his arms. “Willa did go to that interview, yes, but did you know she only stayed one night in New York, when she could’ve stayed a week? That doesn’t seem like a woman who wants to go back there to stay.”

Uncle James let out a sigh. “I’m afraid you’re reading too much into this. Have you asked her if she wants to stay now?”

Daniel barely restrained from squirming in his seat. No, he hadn’t asked her, but he wasn’t the type to ask for permission. He wanted to show Willa he was serious about her staying, and he preferred action to words.

Besides, Uncle James was worrying for no reason.

“I’m also going to get a car for her, so she doesn’t have to keep driving mine. It’ll make her feel more at home,” he added, watching the older man’s face.

Uncle James was silent a long moment. Then he said resignedly, “Let me draw up the paperwork to make Willa a tenant. It won’t take me too long.”

Daniel began browsing on his phone for cars for Willa while Uncle James pulled out his keyboard and typed up the documents. Daniel didn’t have the money to buy Willa some fancy car, but he could get her a reliable used car without spending an arm and a leg. Something that would keep her and Bobby safe if, God forbid, they got into an accident.

He shuddered inwardly at the reminder of his parents, his brother, his brother’s wife. He couldn’t lose any more of the people he loved.

Loved? He knew he loved Bobby, but Willa? No, he cared about her, and he wanted her to be happy, but it wasn’t love. Daniel knew that romantic love wasn’t for him. He’d known it since Caroline had shown him her true colors. He’d thought he’d been in love with Caroline, and look how that had turned out.

The sound of the printer ripped Daniel from his thoughts. Uncle James scanned the freshly printed documents before handing them to Daniel.

“That should cover everything, even if you don’t want her to pay rent. Which seems mighty nice of you, considering she isn’t your wife ... or even your girlfriend.”

Daniel took the papers with a sardonic smile. “She takes care of Bobby. That’s enough for me.”

Uncle James harrumphed. “You really think she’s gonna go for all this?”

For whatever reason, Daniel had never doubted that Willa would embrace his gesture exactly as she had when he’d given her an art shed or when he’d made her lunch. He’d seen how her face had glowed each time he’d given her something. He had a distinct feeling Willa Markson hadn’t been given a lot of nice things in her life, but maybe he could be the one to change that.

“Who would say no to a free place to live, and a car?” countered Daniel. He got up. “Besides, she doesn’t have anyone in New York to go back to. Robert and Stacey were her only friends.” His throat closed as he thought of the younger brother he’d never see again.

“Well, if you think it’s a good idea, I won’t stop you. I’m just an old bachelor, so what do I know about women?”

Not able to help himself, Daniel said, “Yet you’re always talking about Sarah Nevarez.”

Uncle James’s face took on an obstinate look. “Why not? That woman is a holy terror. I went to Jack’s yesterday, and she wouldn’t stop harping on me about how I’d tracked mud inside, when I knew it was those Flannery boys who’d done it!” He gave a snort. “But she swore she saw mud on my boots. Even when I showed her the bottoms, she didn’t believe me. She said I’d just transferred all that mud to her floor.”

Daniel had to bite back a smile. “You two seem to have hated each other for a long time, haven’t you?”

Uncle James dropped his gaze to his desk and muttered, “Hate isn’t a strong enough word for how I feel about that woman.”

“Why do you hate each other?” Daniel kept his voice casual, although he’d always been intensely curious about the details

surrounding his uncle and Sarah. “Aren’t you too long in the tooth to hold a grudge this long?”

Uncle James’s face closed. “None of your business, boy. That’s ancient history, anyway. Now, get along and give the little lady those papers before I tell you again that you’re making a mistake.”

Daniel didn’t need to be told twice. Someday, he’d get that story out of Uncle James. But right this second, he had way more important things to do: namely, getting Willa to really and truly stay here in Texas with him.

## TWENTY

Daniel returned later that morning and handed Willa papers as if he were handing her the keys to the kingdom.

“What is this?” She took the papers with a frown of confusion. Bobby sat on the floor playing with his trucks, but at the sound of Willa’s voice, he got up and came to stand beside her. He pulled at the papers curiously and asked a question, but Willa’s attention was fully on Daniel.

In the hard light of day, she felt as if she should be embarrassed by what had happened last night. It wasn’t that she thought she’d done anything wrong, but she’d never been so desperate for a man, either. She’d turned into some kind of sex kitten in Daniel’s bed, for God’s sake!

Blushing at the memory of his kiss, the feeling of his body on top of hers, Willa struggled to pay attention to what Daniel was saying.

As if he knew her thoughts, he grinned and said, “I don’t want you to feel like a guest anymore, staying here. I want you to make this place yours, too.”

Willa stared at Daniel in shock. As she read through the document, her shock increased. He wanted her to be a tenant but not pay any rent? Was he crazy? Her treacherous heart fluttered at this gesture even as she kept telling herself that she and Daniel were a temporary thing.

Oh, she was in trouble. Big, big trouble. She stared down at the papers, and her heart whispered that she could sign them and stay here with him and Bobby. *There’s nobody waiting for*



*you back in New York, the whisper said. But here's a man who wants you to stay right here in Texas. A man you basically threw yourself at last night. Are you really going to say no to him?*

But New York had work that inspired her and a community that had embraced her upon leaving Texas. New York understood her in a way Texas never would.

“What’re you doing?” said Bobby as he tried to grab at the papers. “I want to see!”

“These are boring. Go play with your trucks. Those are *way* more fun,” she answered.

Bobby looked unconvinced, but he evidently decided that this time he’d obey without further protest. Willa had a feeling she’d pay for that later on, knowing how obstinate Bobby could be when he didn’t get his way.

“I don’t know,” she said quietly to Daniel. “You know I have that job I might get in New York.”

Daniel tilted his head. “But what if you don’t get it?”

She felt a little irritated by his question, but it was mostly because she’d been asking herself the same thing. If this job didn’t pan out with Sensation, what would she do next?

“I need to think about it.”

“That’s fine. Take all the time you need.” Daniel touched her cheek, his gaze turning dark. “I wish you hadn’t left my room last night.”

Her heart thumped hard in her chest. “Me, too.”

“Then next time, you won’t leave?”

*Out of the frying pan and into the fire*, she thought. “Will there be a next time?” She barely recognized the flirtatious note in her voice, but there was something about Daniel that brought out that sex kitten in her.

“Oh, I plan on it,” he drawled, and added in an undertone, “I know I won’t be able to get a damn thing done today, thinking about tonight.”

He kissed her hard, but briefly, before he left the house to go to the fields.

Willa pressed a hand to her chest, desire burning bright in her belly. When she sat down to play with Bobby, she kept staring off into space, thinking about last night and the nights to come. Bobby finally pushed his trucks away, got up, and sat himself down in her lap, whining that he was bored and wanted to do something else.

Later, Willa finally got an email from Grayson about her next interview. She'd hoped that she could do this one over the phone, but Grayson was adamant that she return to New York.

*Email my assistant so we can get the interview scheduled. No cancellations this time, either.*

Well, that was clear enough. Willa couldn't guarantee that something wouldn't come up, but it was strange that the thought of losing out on this job didn't fill her with despair the way it had before. Did that mean she'd already decided to stay here? That she'd sign that document and become a tenant who also happened to be wildly attracted to her landlord?

It was so ridiculous she was tempted to laugh. Then despair filled her, because she had no idea what she was going to do. Daniel was making it harder and harder for her to hang onto her dream of landing this job and staying in New York.

She was annoyed with herself for being so easily swayed from what she'd thought she'd wanted most in life. It shouldn't even be a question, but here she was, weighing the pros and cons of both situations.

And yet ... this was the first time she could remember feeling wanted. Her—plain, weirdo Willa Markson. Even her father had never done so many things for her, and she knew that he loved her.

“Willa, I'm hungry,” said Bobby as he snuggled into her side. “Can we have chicken nuggets?”

“You had chicken nuggets last night. And I think the two days before that. How about a hot dog tonight?”

Bobby considered the question with so much gravity that Willa fought back laughter.

Soon Daniel returned from working, and Willa made Bobby his hot dog (which consisted of a hot dog, bun, and exactly one squirt of ketchup) and then made the adults sandwiches from the leftover chicken she'd cooked the night before.

As they sat at the kitchen table together, all three of them eating, Willa couldn't help feeling like she was sitting with her family. It amazed her how quickly Daniel Gunn had become important to her. When had he changed from being Bobby's uncle to being a man she felt she could truly come to care for? Maybe even love?

Fear curled in her belly at the thought. If she fell in love with Daniel, she'd never get out of Texas. Even worse was knowing he didn't love her, so she was only fixing to get her heart broken.

*I'm not in love with him*, she reasoned to herself. *I'm just attracted to him. Once we get this out of our systems, it'll be over.* She wouldn't compromise her dreams over this ridiculous desire. Sex with Daniel Gunn—no matter how good—wouldn't change everything. She was an adult. She could engage in some after-hours fun without ruining her prospects of happiness in New York.

After she put Bobby to bed, she found Daniel outside the door. Before she could get a word out, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Willa wrapped her arms around his neck and held on as he ravished her mouth, the stubble from his beard rubbing against her chin and cheeks. He'd just taken a shower, and the ends of his hair were still damp.

"I've wanted you all damn day," he growled. He rubbed his arousal against her lower belly.

"I can tell." She reached down and cupped him through his jeans. "You must have really, *really* missed me."

Daniel swore under his breath, and in the next minute, he threw Willa over his shoulder. She covered her mouth to stifle

her laughter so she wouldn't wake up Bobby.

In record time, they were in Daniel's bedroom and stripped naked. Although Willa pulsed with desire, heat filling her veins, she forced herself to slow down and savor the moment.

She took in the musculature of Daniel's body, the crisp, dark hair on his chest that arched down to his belly, his swollen cock. She kissed him everywhere she could reach, her heart pounding, and he groaned her name, sifting his fingers through her curls.

Soon, though, Daniel pushed her onto the bed and thrust himself inside her to the hilt. The bed rocked as they gave and took from one another with an intensity that would've stunned Willa if she could have formed a coherent thought.

In the aftermath, Daniel wrapped her in his arms and whispered, "Stay with me tonight."

Feeling her heart doing that ridiculous little flutter, she nodded, telling herself that she could still protect herself from these feelings that wouldn't stop building inside her.

## TWENTY-ONE

Another week passed in what felt like the blink of an eye. Every night, Willa came to Daniel's bed, and she stayed there until it was time to get Bobby out of bed in the morning.

Some mornings, Daniel wished there wasn't a child in the house so he could enjoy Willa as the sun came up. Seeing her naked and wanting in the sun's rays peeking through the window, shading her skin with hues of pink and gold—

Bobby sneezed, effectively destroying Daniel's daydream. The recent rainstorm had caused worsening hay fever for everyone, Bobby especially. This morning, Willa had found him sniffing and sneezing in his bed, tears in his eyes because he couldn't breathe through his nose.

"I'll go get some allergy medicine," she'd said. "You can try steam to clear his sinuses if he gets really fussy."

Daniel hoped that Willa would return soon because Bobby was only getting crankier. It didn't matter that the air conditioning was on and the house was completely closed up: the little cowpoke's allergies were in full force.

"My nose hurts," whined Bobby, rubbing red eyes. He hiccupped.

"It won't hurt much longer. Willa went to go get you medicine. She'll be right back."

Bobby's lower lip wobbled.

As the minutes ticked by, Daniel wondered what the holdup was. Had the pharmacy not had what Willa needed? If so,

she'd have to go to the next town, a thirty-minute drive, to get the medicine.

Needing to do something, Daniel decided he'd try Willa's steam suggestion. He filled the bathtub with hot water as Bobby sat on the bathroom floor. Soon the room filled with steam, the mirror turning foggy and sweat making Daniel's shirt stick to his skin.

The steam seemed to clear Bobby's sinuses, and he was at last able to breathe through his nose.

"It's too hot in here," said Bobby in confusion as Daniel tried to distract him with the few toys he'd brought into the bathroom. "Let's go, Uncle Danny."

Daniel was sweating bullets himself at this point, but he didn't care. He was just glad that he'd been able to do something for his nephew—and he'd done it without Willa's intervention.

More and more, Daniel felt he could be a parent to Bobby and not totally screw it up. Bobby had also gotten more comfortable around his uncle, and the boy no longer threw a fit every time Willa left Bobby in Daniel's care.

Bobby started yawning, and Daniel realized the boy had probably had a terrible night's sleep because of the allergies..

But more importantly, where was Willa? Daniel sent her a text, to which she replied a few minutes later saying she'd had to go to the next town as Daniel had feared. She'd be back as soon as she could, though.

"How about a rest?" said Daniel, careful to phrase it the way Willa had taught him and not mention anything about a nap.

Bobby shook his head. "I'm not sleepy."

"Okay," Daniel said as he picked the boy up and took him to his room. "We don't need to sleep—just have some quiet time."

Daniel laid the boy in his bed and began to rub his back. Bobby stared up at him with a gaze that Daniel feared could see into his very soul—a soul that cared so deeply for this little boy that he'd do anything in the world for him. Daniel realized

in that moment he'd move mountains to keep Bobby feeling safe and happy and loved.

Daniel kissed Bobby on his temple.

Bobby yawned again, and slowly, his eyelids fluttered closed. Daniel stood over him, listening to his nephew's easier breathing, pleased with himself that he'd done all this on his own.

Right as Daniel shut Bobby's door, he heard Willa's steps on the porch, and he headed to the living room to meet her.

"I'm so sorry! I can't believe it took me that long. I should've stocked up on his allergy meds ages ago, but it slipped my mind." She glanced over Daniel's shoulder toward the hallway to the bedrooms, her forehead creasing. "Is he asleep?"

"He is. I did the steam thing you mentioned. It worked."

"Oh, good. I'm so glad."

She smiled with genuine pleasure, and it shot straight to Daniel's groin. He let her walk to Bobby's door and ease it open for a glance at the little boy in his bed. As soon as she'd pulled the door gently shut again, he took her hand and led her into the living room. They sat on the couch together in companionable silence. Although he was tempted to give in to his desire, he decided he'd rather hold Willa close. Besides, he needed to get to work—eventually.

"Was he really fussy?" said Willa.

"After you left, because he couldn't breathe, yeah. When you didn't come back as soon as I'd thought, I figured I might as well try the steam."

"You two have really come a long way." At Daniel's silence, she added, "He didn't throw a temper tantrum when I left or anything. And you've been putting him down and getting him to sleep almost more than I have."

Daniel swallowed. "When I found out Robert and Stacey had died, I didn't know if I could be what Bobby needed." He'd never admitted this to anyone, but right then, it seemed

important to tell Willa. “I didn’t know if I had it in me to be a parent.”

Willa took his hand and squeezed his fingers. “I’ll admit I wasn’t sure about bringing my friends’ son to a man who didn’t know a thing about children, but you proved me wrong. A million times over. Bobby is going to do great with you. You’re just the person he needs after everything.”

Daniel couldn’t name this emotion welling in his chest: gratitude, amazement, or, God forbid, love? Overwhelmed, he captured Willa’s mouth in a passionate kiss.

The kiss was tinged with desperation, though, because her acknowledgment that Daniel could be the parent Bobby needed meant that she didn’t have to stay for Bobby’s sake. The only reason she would stay would be for Daniel himself. A wild hope filled him, but it was soon tempered when he remembered that Willa hadn’t yet signed the papers to become his tenant.

She was still going to go to her interview. She was still planning to return to New York. He’d be a fool not to believe in her tenacity to go after her dream, just like Uncle James had said.

Yet she was here, in his arms, and she hadn’t said no when he’d given her the papers to sign. Kissing her and pushing her down onto the couch, Daniel gave in to desire, and Willa met him with an intoxicating enthusiasm.



## TWENTY-TWO

Willa smiled as she watched Daniel attempt to show Bobby how to fish. When he'd presented Bobby with his own child-sized fishing pole, Willa had refrained from telling him that Bobby had no idea how to cast a line or reel in a fish because Daniel had seemed so pleased with himself.

Willa knew that Bobby still didn't understand quite how fishing worked, exactly, but the little boy gave Daniel his rapt attention anyway. It had helped that Daniel had pointed out to Bobby the silvery trout swimming in the stream when they'd arrived.

"Look at the fish!" said Bobby excitedly to Daniel. "Look, there's one!"

"That's right, and we use this to catch them," said Daniel as he showed Bobby how to hold the pole. It didn't have a hook on it, of course, so Bobby wouldn't be able to catch anything even if he knew how to use it properly.

Willa took out her phone to snap photos of the pair.

"Willa, look!" Bobby shook the fishing pole as he looked over at Willa to make sure she was watching. "I'm fishing!"

"I know! Good job, Bobby. You look so grown up."

Daniel picked up his own pole that he'd already cast into the water, and together, he and Bobby stood silently, waiting for a bite. Bobby, though, kept trying to cast his line the way he'd seen his uncle do. Willa giggled as she watched him.

“I brought you one, too,” said Daniel to Willa. “Have you ever fished?”

“Of course I have. I’m from Texas, aren’t I?” Willa went over to where Daniel had placed the third pole and fishing tackle. “Let’s see who can catch a fish first.”

Daniel grinned. “But I have a head start.”

“I can still win,” said Willa confidently.

With Bobby between them, Willa and Daniel waited, their breaths held. Willa felt a slight tug on her line, but it disappeared just as quickly.

“Where are the fish?” Bobby shook his pole. “I want a fish. Uncle Danny said I could have one.”

“It takes time to catch fish,” explained Daniel again, his voice as patient as ever. “And you have to stay quiet, otherwise they’ll get scared and skedaddle.”

Bobby’s face screwed up, but he stayed quiet—until three minutes later when he cried, “What’s that?” as he pointed to the brush across the stream.

A rabbit darted into the woods in a flash of brown, which caused Bobby to toss his fishing pole aside and lunge forward as if he was going to try to chase after the animal.

“Whoa there, buddy, careful,” Daniel said, grabbing the arm of the small, excited boy to keep him out of the stream. “The rabbit is already gone.” Daniel placed his pole on the bank, tying it to a stake so it wouldn’t go into the water. “Let’s eat lunch. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

Willa followed them to the big tree, and the three ate their sandwiches in its shade. Soon, Bobby grew bored and started running a train over the grooves in the tree’s bark, content to play while Willa and Daniel finished eating.

“This was a good idea,” said Willa quietly. “Even if Bobby is too young to really fish.”

Daniel frowned slightly. “You know, I never thought I’d marry or have kids, but lately, I haven’t been able to stop imagining going fishing with my son.” He gazed over at Bobby with a

loving smile. “Who would’ve thought I’d end up becoming another father to my nephew and showing him how to fish? I wish Robert were here instead, but I guess this is as good as Bobby is gonna get.”

Willa touched Daniel’s knee. “Hey, you’re doing a great job. I wish Robert and Stacey were here, too, but sometimes life throws us curveballs. Big, giant, terrible, tragic curveballs. It’s how you respond to them that matters. You could’ve said you didn’t want Bobby at all.”

“I’m not sure I should be patted on the back for showing basic human decency,” said Daniel dryly, “but thank you, all the same. I just hope I can live up to your expectations.”

Willa was about to say that he’d more than lived up to her expectations when her pole went taut. Running to it, she began to reel in her catch, struggling a bit as the fish fought capture. Daniel came to stand behind her and helped her reel in the fish. When she lifted her catch from the stream—at least a ten-pound trout—Willa laughed aloud.

“Look at this guy! I can’t believe there are trout this big in this stream.” She made sure to lay the fish down far enough from the water to keep it from flopping to freedom. She beamed up at Daniel. “I win! I told you I’d win.”

“You did.”

The moment turned quiet, and when Daniel leaned in to kiss her, Willa couldn’t help but feel how right it was for him to kiss her. His lips took hers with tenderness, but it soon turned into a kiss that made Willa want to strip out of her clothes and make love under the sunshine.

Of course, that wasn’t an option with Bobby right there, no matter how distracted he was by his train. And anyway, she wasn’t all that interested in having sex in the grass where any number of bugs lived. She laughed a little at the thought.

“You laughing at me?” said Daniel with a raised eyebrow.

“No, never.”

Daniel didn’t believe her, so he tickled her until she told him why she’d been laughing.

“Beds are better for sex, anyway.” Daniel’s eyes gleamed with desire. “So how about we pack up and go home?”

Willa nodded her assent. After they’d packed up the fishing gear, Daniel reached for Bobby’s hand and the little boy eagerly took it, running alongside his uncle.

Seeing Daniel’s tender side always made Willa want to drag him into bed. By the time they had finished off the afternoon and completed the dinner and bedtime routine for Bobby, Willa was starved for Daniel. She threw herself into his arms the moment he closed Bobby’s door.

She kissed him hard and dug her nails into his shoulders, wordlessly telling him she wanted him rougher, faster, harder. She didn’t want tenderness and soft caresses right then. She wanted Daniel to take control and make her his.

Primal desire flamed inside her, matched only by Daniel’s own lust for her.

As Daniel kissed down along her neck, Willa said, “I don’t want you to be gentle with me.”

He looked up in surprise, but soon his pupils dilated as he took in her command. He bit her shoulder before rumbling, “Whatever the lady wants.”

After that, he took complete control, and Willa loved it. She’d always had to worry about other people, had to be the one to keep things in order, and allowing herself to surrender control to someone else was a heady feeling.

Daniel seemed to feel the same way as he practically ripped her clothes off, buttons from her blouse flying everywhere. “Get on the bed on your knees,” he said.

Willa shivered, but not with fear. She sank down on the bed, rolled to her hands and knees, and waited, anticipation heightening the moment. She heard movement, a rustling noise, and then she gasped when Daniel kissed her heated center. His fingers dug into her hips to hold her steady as he licked and sucked, his mouth doing things that Willa could never have imagined.

As she tried to arch against him, needing release, he laughed in a low voice. “You’ll come when I say you can.”

Willa whined and then moaned as he continued to play with her. He was relentless. She collapsed onto her forearms, any self-consciousness having faded away in the onslaught of sheer pleasure. When Daniel pushed a finger inside her, she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming.

He began to rub her sensitive nub. “Come for me, Willa,” he commanded, and it only took a few more strokes of his clever fingers for her release to slam into her.

Before she could even catch her breath, she felt Daniel press inside her until he was sheathed to the hilt.

“God, Willa,” he groaned as he began to thrust. He pounded into her, filling her until she couldn’t breathe. She clutched the comforter and could only hold on.

She’d never been *taken* like this in her life. It was overwhelming, amazing, terrifying. Bowing her head, Willa felt her second orgasm building deep in her belly.

Daniel took her hard and fast, exactly as she had asked. His fingers would surely leave bruises on her hips, and she didn’t care. She moaned and whined and writhed, and then she was coming so hard she blacked out. She could hear Daniel groan as he froze and quivered in his own release.

They collapsed onto the bed together, a sweaty heap of limbs. Willa’s heart pounded as if she’d run a marathon; her body tingled from head to toe. She had a distinct feeling that she’d be sore from all this, but she didn’t give a damn.

“That do it for you?” said Daniel.

Willa laughed. “Oh, I don’t know. How about you try to give me orgasm number three?”

He groaned. “You’re insatiable.” But then, a few minutes later, he took her up on her suggestion.

## TWENTY-THREE

That Saturday, Daniel and Willa attended the annual fundraiser for the town's fire department. This year, it was a fancy dinner that would also include a silent auction. Daniel had forgotten all about it until Willa had mentioned it to him, having heard about it from her friend DeeDee.

It had taken Daniel all of thirty seconds to decide to attend with Willa.

Now, the two of them sat together at a table that included Uncle James, DeeDee and her husband Doug, and another couple whose names Daniel couldn't remember. As a matter of fact, he didn't particularly care all that much about learning their names because his attention was focused solely on Willa.

Wearing a black dress that showed off her shoulders, her hair swept into a bun with tendrils escaping, Willa looked gorgeous. When she'd come out of her room, it had taken every scrap of Daniel's self-control not to ravish her right then and there. It had helped that Sarah had been there to babysit Bobby, so Daniel had restrained himself until they'd gotten into the car.

"I know I'm your date, but I want to keep everything quiet for now," Willa had said on their way to the fundraiser. She'd turned apologetic eyes to Daniel. "Mostly because I don't want questions. You know how people are in a small town."

He did know, but it stung all the same. After everything he'd done, Willa still had no intention of staying, did she? He'd

agreed, albeit with reluctance, deciding he'd need to persuade Willa in some other way to stay here in Texas with him.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look?" he said now, leaning down to whisper in Willa's ear.

She blushed. "Only about five times."

Daniel saw Uncle James look over at them, a frown marring his face. He thought of his uncle's warning when he'd gone to the old man's office that day. It wouldn't do for Uncle James to get even more suspicious about the nature of their relationship.

But as servers began to bring around plates of appetizers and murmurs mingled with the music playing quietly overhead, Daniel felt a warm foot against his leg. He glanced over at Willa to see her eyes gleaming.

So much for self-control! When she rubbed her foot up and down his calf, Daniel bit back a groan. He was like a teenage boy, getting turned on from a silly game of footsie.

Wanting to give as bad as he got, he rubbed his own foot against her bare calf, and soon they were practically battling under the tablecloth to one-up each other.

Willa, though, had the advantage, as Daniel was too big to extend his leg as far as she could. And she was more flexible. When her foot brushed his right inner thigh, he almost shot out of his chair.

She batted her eyelashes at him. "Something the matter?"

He was halfway tempted to throw her over his shoulder and take her outside to spank her. The thought of spanking her luscious ass only made him harder.

He mock-glared at her and ate his shrimp cocktail without tasting anything, even the spicy sauce. Soon the rest of their food was served, and conversation began to flow around the table. Occasionally Willa would rub Daniel's leg when he least expected it, but with Uncle James staring at him, he had to keep his expression carefully blank.

DeeDee turned to Willa. “When’s your next interview?” she asked. “Didn’t you say they wanted you in New York again?”

“It’s scheduled three weeks from now. I asked if I could do it over the phone, but no go. The owner of the gallery is kind of a hard-ass,” said Willa.

Daniel could feel Uncle James’s gaze on him, as if to say, *I told you she ain’t stayin’ here*. Daniel pointedly ignored him.

“I know you want that job, but I’ll be so sad when you leave.” DeeDee shot a look at Daniel. “You should make her stay, you know. Show her how good it is here.”

Uncle James coughed; Willa blushed.

“And what about that little boy?” This was from the woman whose name Daniel couldn’t remember. Karen Something-or-other, he thought. She and her husband preferred to keep their own company and didn’t mix much with the rest of the folks in town.

“What about Bobby? His uncle is taking care of him.” Willa smiled, but Daniel could tell it was a pained smile.

Karen wasn’t going to let it go that easily. Seemed like she had some kind of ax to grind as she threw back her head and gave the rest of the table a haughty look. “What does a bachelor know about taking care of a child? Nothing, that’s what. I wouldn’t leave my daughter alone with a man if you paid me.”

“Baby ...” Karen’s husband tried to soothe in a low voice.

Daniel rather wished he could strangle Karen, but instead, he said jokingly, “Isn’t that kind of sexist? Or is it the reverse of sexist?”

Willa’s lip twitched. “Something like that. Besides, Daniel has been doing an amazing job with Bobby. He doesn’t need me here anymore.”

Daniel winced inwardly.

“The little lady is right,” drawled Uncle James, “my nephew didn’t know nothin’ about children when Bobby first arrived, but like any other human being, he’s learned. And there ain’t



no rule sayin' a man can't take care of young'uns or put them to bed like the ladies do."

Karen, miffed now, talked exclusively to her husband the rest of the evening. Come to think of it, it wasn't all bad.

DeeDee leaned over and said to Willa in a voice only Willa and Daniel could hear, "Karen's always had a stick up her ass. Don't mind her."

"Oh, I noticed," said Willa wryly.

As the evening continued, Daniel couldn't help feeling morose after hearing Willa's declaration that he didn't need her. He realized for the first time that he'd risked his own heart in all of this. He'd thought he could keep things casual, and even when he'd given her those papers, he'd thought ... Well, he didn't rightly know what he'd thought, he was so mixed up inside now.

The one thing he did know was he didn't want Willa to leave. No, it wasn't only about wanting—he *needed* her to stay for him, and him alone. Somehow, all of this had become about the two of them and not about the little boy who had brought them together in the first place.

Yet Daniel felt that if he pushed too hard, Willa would run. She'd already run from her own father, hadn't she? And Daniel hadn't exactly told her he loved her, something he knew women needed to hear before they committed. Willa would never admit as much, but Daniel wasn't completely stupid.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for coming tonight!" said the fundraiser's host, interrupting Daniel's thoughts. "Every single one of you is here to support our firefighters. Let's give them a round of applause for serving the community."

As everyone clapped, Daniel got up to use the restroom. When he was done, he found Uncle James waiting for him outside in the hallway, arms crossed.

"What the hell are you on about, son?" the older man said without preamble.

Daniel scowled. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act stupid with me. We already talked about this once, but I see what I said didn’t get through that thick skull of yours. I’m talking about you and that little lady.”

Daniel was too irritated by his uncle’s judgmental tone to care that someone could easily hear them. “I hate to break it to you, Uncle,” he said, “but I’m not some ten-year-old you can bully into doing what you want anymore.”

“I’ve never bullied you, but I have given you advice, like I am now. You already know how this is going to end: badly.”

“So you can see the future?”

“Ain’t nobody need a crystal ball to know that Miss Markson has said over and over again that she’s leaving.” Uncle James pointed a finger at Daniel. “If you think she ain’t speaking truth, you’re a fool.”

“Don’t call me a fool, old man.” Daniel drew himself up; it helped that he was a number of inches taller than his uncle. “What I’m doing with Willa is none of your business, but I also know she hasn’t left yet. She’s still here, isn’t she? She might be saying one thing, but her actions say something else.”

Uncle James frowned. “She just said tonight she ain’t staying. How much clearer do you need it?”

“Like I said—words are one thing. Actions are another.”

Sighing, Uncle James uncrossed his arms, his granite expression turning sad. “I’m sorry, son. I don’t mean to make you angry. I just want what’s best for you. With your folks no longer around, I feel like it’s my duty to give you advice, even if you’re grown now.”

Daniel couldn’t stay angry in the face of his uncle’s concern. He leaned against the wall, rubbing his temples.

“I just don’t understand why you two are hiding what you have,” continued Uncle James.

“Willa wanted to keep it on the down-low.”

“And that isn’t a bad sign to you?”

Daniel knew how it looked, so he didn’t say anything. Doing things by the book was how he usually preferred his life. It was how he stayed organized. How he maintained his success with the farm. If he was following his own rules, he would have already started telling people about him and Willa. But Willa didn’t exactly conform to his rules—she’d proven that the moment she showed up on his porch—so all he could say was, “I don’t want to spook her.” He paused, eying his uncle, and went on, “She reminds me of that mare I got a few years back. The nervous one. You had to approach her carefully and quietly, otherwise she was liable to kick you in the balls. Remember how long it took me to get her to trust me?”

“Not sure the little lady would ’preciate being compared to a horse.” Uncle James’s tone was wry.

Daniel laughed, the mood lifting a little. “Don’t tell her I said that, then. I hear what you’re saying. I do. But let me handle this in my own time and terms. I know Willa better than you do.”

“Just as long as you’re cautious.” His voice low, James added, “I remember how you were after Caroline.”

Daniel grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was think of his broken engagement to the one woman he’d thought he’d loved. He was tempted to tell his uncle to shut up, but he bit his tongue. “Give me time,” he said instead. “And don’t try to interfere; otherwise, you’re going to get kicked.”

Uncle James guffawed. “Son, you think I don’t know that about women? I might be old, but I ain’t stupid. No sirree. I’ve been kicked by women before, and I ain’t interested in getting kicked a second time. Them hooves are mighty sharp.” He winked.

With that opening, Daniel said, “If you’re going to say something like that, you gotta explain what happened.”

Uncle James’s expression turned mulish, but then he sighed. “You know me and Sarah were an item once, right? That was

thirty years ago. I thought we were meant to be, and all that horse hockey.”

Daniel had been wondering about the origins of their apparent feud for years. “So what happened?”

“Life. Circumstances. I wanted to go to law school and make something of myself before we married. Sarah said we should get married so she could go with me. She didn’t want to wait—so she didn’t.” Uncle James shrugged and added, rather lamely, “That was it.”

Daniel was about to ask for further details when someone walked around the corner to use the restroom.

“We better get back,” said Uncle James.

“Where were you?” said Willa as Daniel sat back down next to her. “Did you get lost on the way to pee?”

Daniel laughed softly. “Something like that. My uncle wanted to talk to me about some business matters,” he lied.

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t get lost, otherwise I would’ve had to send a search party for you.”

Taking Willa’s hand under the table, Daniel squeezed her fingers, telling himself that everything would work out in the end. This wasn’t another Caroline situation. He wouldn’t get his heart broken a second time.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The days passed in a blur of activity. If Willa wasn't watching Bobby, she was visiting friends or spending time with Daniel. Her days were filled with fun, while her nights were all heat and desire. She marveled that she wasn't exhausted every day when she woke up.

Then again, seeing Daniel in his Wranglers and boots every morning was a great way to wake up. Even better was when he *wasn't* wearing anything at all.

After the night of the fundraiser, Willa had sensed something was bothering Daniel. Despite her best attempts to get him to open up, he'd skillfully dodged her questions. Deciding he'd talk when he wanted to, Willa had let it go.

Besides, it wasn't as if they were in a real relationship. They'd never talked about commitment; they both avoided discussing the future like the plague. They were solely interested in the present, and Willa would do well to remember that.

The Saturday a week prior to Willa's return to New York, Willa agreed to help DeeDee with concessions at the town's basketball tournament at the rec center. Except DeeDee ended up canceling at the last minute because Izzy was sick.

So now Willa was doing concessions on her own, which she discovered to be more complicated than she'd expected. Who knew getting the perfect amount of artificial cheese onto nachos was basically an art form? It took Willa five tries before she'd gotten it down.

“I’ll have three hot dogs—one with relish, one without, and one with only mustard—and a Coke, Diet Coke, and Sprite,” said Willa’s next customer.

Willa managed to get the hot dogs right, but she messed up the soda order, and almost gave the man double the change. Luckily this wasn’t New York, where they would’ve taken the change without saying anything. It also helped that people here were generally too nice to show any irritation at Willa’s mistakes.

The game finally started, and Willa breathed a sigh of relief when she could take a small break. DeeDee owed her a big one, leaving her to do this all by herself. Then again, was caring for a preschooler harder than getting people their hot dogs? Right then, Willa didn’t know the answer, and her speculation made her laugh at herself.

It was hard to stay mad these days when everything felt so right. Bobby was happier than ever, and being with Daniel brought Willa joy. Daniel was not only kind, but he was smart and funny—when he wanted to be. He was also devoted to his nephew despite the initial shaky start. Willa had never met a man quite like Daniel Gunn.

“No customers?” said Uncle James as he approached the stand. “Or did you scare them all away, little lady?” Daniel, Bobby in tow, stood next to Uncle James. Daniel shot Willa a smile.

Willa crinkled her nose. “I’m taking a breather. You know how intense people are about their hot dogs and nachos?”

Uncle James chuckled. “I do know. Which is why I’m going to give you an easy order: one large Coke, no ice.”

“I think I can manage that. Daniel, do you or Bobby want anything?”

“I’m hungry!” piped up Bobby.

Willa leaned over the stand so she could see the little boy. “Didn’t you just eat lunch? I could’ve sworn you ate some chicken nuggets only an hour ago.”

“He’s a boy,” said Daniel wryly. “All he wants to do is eat.”

Willa wished she could give Bobby something better than junk food or soda, but when Bobby insisted he was hungry, she prepared a hot dog and handed it to Daniel on a plate. When she gave Uncle James his soda, she told him that the soda and hot dog were on the house.

“Much appreciated, little lady.” Uncle James winked at her before giving her and Daniel a little space.

“How are you holding up? If I could keep Bobby from touching everything, I’d help you out here,” said Daniel.

“I’m fine. Go enjoy the game. I’d much rather read a book than watch basketball, anyway.”

Daniel tugged on one of her curls. “Of course you would. I’ll see you later, babe.” He gave her a quick kiss, which surprised Willa, considering they were in a public place. But she didn’t have the heart to be annoyed with him for it. Besides, no one had seen them—she hoped.

Willa was attending to a family of four who’d come up as the threesome had turned away when she heard the voices of Daniel and Uncle James coming from around the corner of the concession stand. Why hadn’t they returned to the game? She frowned, only to give a start when the woman ordering sodas cleared her throat to get Willa’s attention. She hurried to add ice to the cups and sloshed in the soda, handing the beverages over and thanking them for their cheerful “Keep the change for the team.” As the family turned away, she breathed a sigh of relief.

The conversation around the corner was still going. “—need to know about it,” Willa heard Daniel say.

“Seems silly to keep it a secret,” said Uncle James.

Willa knew she shouldn’t eavesdrop, but she was too curious to hear what Daniel’s secret was. Oh God, was Uncle James talking about *them*? Did he know they were ... involved? Her stomach dropped.

“It’s not a secret, but I don’t want people to look at me sideways,” said Daniel.

“Who’s gonna think it’s strange that you helped build this place with your own money?”

Willa blinked. That was the secret? That Daniel had donated to help build this rec center? She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the startled laugh that almost burst forth.

Soon the voices faded, meaning Daniel, Uncle James, and Bobby had returned to the game, leaving Willa to wonder about what she discovered. She couldn’t blame Daniel for not broadcasting his donation. He wasn’t the type to welcome public praise. She respected him for that. She didn’t like to be the center of attention, either. Besides, if somebody needed a pat on the back each time they did a good deed, that didn’t make the good deed selfless to begin with.

Although Willa had brought a book, she ended up watching the game from her vantage point behind the concession stand. In truth, she was mostly watching Daniel with Bobby. Bobby kept trying to climb out of his seat, and Willa had to laugh when Daniel resorted to basically grabbing the boy by his pants to keep him from tumbling into the next row.

During halftime, families could go on the court and shoot baskets. Daniel took Bobby down onto the court and, putting him on his shoulders, had him throw a child-sized ball at the basket. It never went in, but Bobby didn’t care. He laughed each time the ball bounced away as if it was the funniest thing in the world.

Willa’s heart flip-flopped watching them. Bobby was in good hands—the perfect hands after his parents. She didn’t have to worry about him.

By the time the game was over, Willa’s feet hurt, and she wanted a shower to get the smell of grease off of her skin. She joined Daniel and Bobby as they walked to the car. Buckled into his car seat, the boy was out for the count for the ride home.

They talked about the game, and Willa told funny stories about the orders she’d messed up. But she couldn’t help thinking about what she’d overheard earlier. Deciding she might as well



bite the bullet, she said, “I overheard you talking to Uncle James.”

Daniel shot a quick glance at her. “Oh?”

“About you donating to the rec center but not wanting anyone to know.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah.”

“I shouldn’t have eavesdropped, I know. I sort of get why you’d keep it a secret, but why does it matter so much if people knew?”

Daniel didn’t answer for a long moment before shrugging. “I’d rather not have people know. That’s all. I have the money, and I wanted to spend it on something that would benefit lots of people. So I did. That’s really all there is to the story. Besides, since it’s just me, I don’t have tons of expenses. I can afford to donate where others with families can’t.”

“You have Bobby now, though.”

“Well, yes. I meant before all of this happened, obviously.”

Willa fell silent. She couldn’t help hearing the other implication in Daniel’s words: he didn’t have a wife to worry about, either. Unbidden, an image of being that wife filled her mind. Sleeping in Daniel’s bed every night, cooking dinner for him and Bobby, helping him on the farm. Maybe having children with him.

Her heart tightened as she told herself that wasn’t going to happen. She was going back to New York where her future waited. That was where she belonged.

That night, Willa went to Daniel’s room after showering. Instead of saying anything, she kissed him. She didn’t know what to say, anyhow. It was a tender kiss, expressing gratitude, kindness, and admiration for this man who’d changed her world in such a short time. All she knew was that she wanted to give him something tonight.

She knelt in front of him and, after unzipping his jeans, she wrapped her fingers around his cock before taking him into her mouth.

He shuddered as she licked him from root to tip. She swirled her tongue around the tip as she squeezed him, and when he swore long and low, she smiled.

“Your mouth should be illegal,” he said. He dug his fingers into her hair. “If you keep that up, this night will be over before it even started.”

Willa was halfway tempted to continue just to see him lose control. But soon Daniel gently pushed her away and took her hands to pull her to her feet so he could kiss her.

“You’re incredible,” he said.

Willa beamed and was about to reply the same, but Daniel was too intent on kissing her. Things started to progress from there.

When at last they were both naked, Willa climbed on top of Daniel, sheathing herself on his cock. She rode him slowly as she stared into his eyes. Heat spread from where they were joined, filling her veins, until she finally closed her eyes and focused solely on her own pleasure.

“Willa,” groaned Daniel as he bucked under her. “You’re driving me crazy.”

She smiled, her eyelids fluttering open. “That was the plan.”

Daniel reached up and pulled her head down for a ravenous kiss. He pumped into her, taking over, until they were both mindless with wanting. They came together, and Willa collapsed onto Daniel’s chest, gasping for breath.

Willa laid her head on Daniel’s shoulder. He played with her fingers, the sounds of the night filling the room. Strangely enough, it was lying in bed together in silence that felt the most intimate. Maybe that was the reason why Willa had wanted to sleep in her own room for so long. At the moment, she was almost tempted to give in to fear and go back to her bed, but she also didn’t want this moment to end, either.

It was strange to be torn between such disparate feelings. His bed or hers. Texas or New York. Willa barely understood herself.

Then Daniel gazed into her eyes, and his smile made all such thoughts disappear for a moment. He kissed her forehead, skimming his hand down her back. Willa let herself fall into his kiss until nothing in the world existed except for Daniel Gunn and this moment.

Later, she curled next to him, her cheek against his chest. She listened to the steady thump of his heart until its beat lulled her to a dreamless sleep.

## TWENTY-FIVE

On Monday, Willa returned to the living room to find Bobby coloring on some paper she definitely had not given him. Taking the paper from him and seeing that it was some important document of Daniel's, she grimaced.

Then she read something that caught her attention: Daniel's birthday. Which also happened to be in ... five days.

He hadn't said a thing, the sly jerk! If Willa had known, she would've thought to throw him a party. Frowning, she placed the document in Daniel's office before returning to the living room and sitting down on the floor with Bobby.

"He thinks since he didn't tell me, he's not getting a party," she said to the little boy. "Well, we'll see about that."

Bobby, for his part, handed her a plastic wrench so they could play construction worker.

Although she initially wanted to plan a party for Daniel, on further thought, she quickly realized he wouldn't enjoy a party. Instead, she decided on a fundraiser to help build a new addition at the rec center. The fundraiser would be in Daniel's honor. Surely he wouldn't object to something like that, she reasoned.

Five days! It was a total whirlwind, and it would never have happened without DeeDee and Sarah's combined help, but Willa managed to get the fundraiser together in that short time. It helped that the entire town loved and respected Daniel, too. So many told Willa they'd drop any plans they had so they could attend.

“I knew his parents,” one man had said as he’d dashed a tear from his eye. “His brother, too. Nothing I wouldn’t do for that kid.”

By the time Saturday arrived, Willa could barely keep the fundraiser a secret, she was so excited. Luckily, Daniel had been so preoccupied with farm work every day that he hadn’t noticed how often Willa had been running into town or leaving the room to talk on her phone.

She just hoped and prayed he’d like his surprise not-party.





It had been a long week, but instead of relaxing on the weekend, Willa had insisted that they go into town to do something fun instead of sitting at home. When Daniel entered the rec center's large gymnasium where they'd attended the basketball game, he thought they'd come to the wrong place.

The gymnasium had been turned into a carnival with all kinds of games: horseshoes, bag toss, pin the tail on the donkey. Kids screamed and ran all over the place while harried parents tried to catch them.

"What is this?" said Daniel, turning to Willa.

Her smile was wide, her eyes sparkling. "Happy birthday!" She squeezed his arm.

Now it was his turn to narrow his eyes at her. "How did you find out?"

"Oh, I have my ways. And when I found out, I knew I had to do something. I wanted to throw you a party, but I thought: I can do something better than that." Willa gestured at the carnival. "It's a fundraiser for the new building here. In your honor. It also helped that the Lutheran church had just hosted a carnival and had all the supplies handy."

Daniel couldn't speak, he was so surprised. And honored. He couldn't believe Willa had not only gone to the trouble of putting this together, but that she'd known he didn't like parties for himself. It was such a thoughtful gesture.

Daniel didn't say anything for such a long moment. Willa's smile faltered.

"Are you happy?" she asked. "We don't have to stay long—"

"I love it," he said sincerely. "This is amazing."

She beamed up at him, and he could honestly say he'd never seen a more beautiful sight. Only the distraction of Bobby tugging on his jeans kept him from doing something truly stupid, like shouting to everyone how amazing this woman

was, and then sealing the deal by wrapping her in his arms and kissing her.

“Let’s go play, Uncle Danny,” said Bobby. “Come on!”

“There are games for little ones over there.” Willa took Bobby’s hand to lead him in the right direction as Daniel followed.

“Happy birthday, son!” Uncle James came up and slapped him on the shoulder with a wide grin. “I have to tell you, your little lady worked her tail off to get this done. I’ve never seen a more determined woman.”

Willa blushed a little. “I had a lot of help. Your uncle pitched in, too.”

“Don’t try to act like this would’ve happened without you,” said Uncle James.

Daniel was stopped again and again, until finally Willa mouthed that she’d meet him at the kiddie pool with Bobby. Bobby, for his part, was impatient to play, and standing around listening to adults was the height of boredom.

“Well, this turned out all right,” said Sarah, her hair in her customary braid. “I didn’t know if we could pull it together in time, but Willa wouldn’t hear no for an answer.”

“I had no idea she was planning this,” admitted Daniel with a laugh. “She sure knows how to keep a big secret.”

“I can’t believe this whole town kept it a secret. It’s a miracle.” Lowering her voice, Sarah added, “This goes to show that Willa is feeling like she belongs, you know? She talked and called and managed almost everyone in this town, and I know she wouldn’t have done that for anybody but you. You’re a lucky man, Danny.” She wagged a finger in his face, making him feel all of five years old. “Don’t do anything stupid, got it?”

Daniel wanted to disclaim that Willa wasn’t his, but as he turned to watch Willa play with Bobby, he knew that was a lie. She’d been his since—he didn’t know when. That first kiss? The first time they’d slept together? Or had it been the first



time he'd seen her, that day when she'd brought Bobby to him?

It was in that moment he realized he loved her. He'd probably known it for ages now, but he'd told himself it wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen because he didn't think love existed. Well, he'd been wrong, hadn't he? So very, very wrong.

He loved Willa Markson with all his heart, and if he couldn't get her to stay with him, he knew he'd never recover from the blow. He couldn't let her go.

He didn't know when Willa had become the representation of everything he wanted in life, but he knew it was true.

His heart hammering, he went to Willa and Bobby, trying to keep his composure and act as if he hadn't just had a momentous realization.

Bobby helped distract him, though. A kiddie pool had been set up and filled with sand and toys they could dig up. When Bobby found his first toy—a rubber duck—he was so excited he was close to throwing all the sand from the pool.

“Hey, buddy, look,” said Daniel, pointing to where something was poking from the sand. “Can you get it?”

Bobby dug into the sand and grabbed the toy truck with a laugh.

“Good job!” Willa kissed him on the cheek. “You're so good at this, Bobby.”

Later in the evening, when Willa announced how much money had been raised for the rec center, Daniel knew he had to tell her how he felt. It was practically bursting from his chest, he was so proud and touched by her hard work.

“Thank you to everyone who helped put this together!” said Willa. “Without all of you, Daniel and I would've been throwing darts and doing the coin toss all by our lonesome.”

The crowd laughed. Daniel headed to the front of the room to stand next to Willa. He leaned in to say into the microphone, “I had no idea this was happening. So y'all should pat

yourselves on the back for keeping such a big secret from me.” He narrowed his eyes playfully. “Although I’m not sure I should trust any of y’all ever again, you know.”

By the time the carnival was over and everyone was beginning to go home, Daniel was impatient to speak with Willa. He was halfway tempted to do it here in the rec center, but he resisted the temptation. He didn’t want this to be overheard, and he sure as hell didn’t want to be interrupted, either.

The drive home felt like eternity, and then there was all the necessary settling in to be done before he was alone with Willa. He did the outside chores while she took care of things inside. Bobby needed a bath, for starters, and had been shouting and splashing as Daniel had headed out to the barn. Even so, Bobby was still awake and protesting bedtime when Daniel came into the house, and the little boy had gone on to resist falling asleep after all of the activity of the day.

At last, Willa came to Daniel’s room, her expression tired. “What a day,” she moaned before collapsing onto the bed, still wearing her jeans. “I could sleep for a week.” She yawned loudly.

“Don’t fall asleep on me yet.” Daniel sat down next to her. “I want to talk to you.”

Willa rolled over onto her side so she could look up at him. “What?”

Daniel had thought over the words on the car ride home, but now everything he’d thought of saying escaped his mind. Deciding to ease into the conversation, he said, “What you did today was really amazing, Willa. I can’t thank you enough for it.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome. You’ve done so much for me that I wanted to do something special for you. Even if I found out about your birthday in a sneaky way.”

“The fact that you didn’t just throw me a party ...” Daniel shook his head. “You did something I’m pretty sure nobody else would’ve thought to do. It’s like you read my mind. Putting together a fundraiser in my honor ...”

Willa sat up and took his hand. “I’m glad you were happy with it. I really wanted you to enjoy yourself but not feel like you were the center of attention. And when I found out how much you’d given to rec center already—and to this town—I knew I needed to do something to show how much everyone cares about you and appreciates you. Although no one really knows that you donated money to the rec center, of course.”

“I’m not talking about everyone else in this town,” said Daniel firmly. “I’m talking about you, Willa.” He cupped her face. “Nobody has understood me like you have. I realized tonight that you’re perfect for me. What can I do to get you to stay?”

Willa froze under his touch. “What are you saying?” she whispered.

“I’m saying I want you to stay.” And knowing this was his only chance, he added, “And that I love you.”

She stared at him, her eyes as wide as saucers. Then she pulled away until he was no longer touching her, setting off a frisson of fear in Daniel’s heart.

“You love me?” she repeated. “Are you serious?”

Daniel suddenly couldn’t catch his breath. “Do you think I’d joke about something like that?”

“No—I mean. I don’t know what I mean.” She wrung her hands. “You know I’m going back to New York. I’ve told you a billion times.”

“I know you have, but things have changed.” When she looked away, he moved her chin so she couldn’t avoid his gaze.

“You know they have,” he continued. “And don’t tell me you don’t care about me, because this fundraiser today says otherwise.”

Willa’s chest rose and fell quickly, and Daniel half-expected her to run from the room. She looked like a rabbit staring down a wolf. Did words of love really terrify her so much? Daniel wanted to wrap her in his arms, but that would probably spook her even more.

“Stay here with me. Let’s make this thing real. Because I really do love you, Willa Markson.”

Willa covered her face with her hands. “You can’t love me!” she said in a muffled voice. “And I can’t stay here. You don’t understand.”

When Daniel tried to take her hand, she wrenched away from him and stood up.

“Willa—”

“No, you don’t get it.” Tears fell from her eyes now. “I can’t stay here. I belong in New York. I’ve never belonged in Texas. I’m not somebody who can be a housewife and forget about art and everything else that matters to me.”

Daniel swallowed hard, scarcely registering the words for the hurt churning in his gut. “I’m not asking you to forget about those things.”

Her voice broke, and she sobbed out, “I care about you, and I love Bobby with all my heart. But that doesn’t mean a bird and a fish should be together, even if they love each other. Where would they live?” She cried harder, and the sound broke Daniel’s heart.

He stepped toward her, about to embrace her, but he stopped himself. “Don’t cry, sweetheart,” he said awkwardly. “We can figure this out.”

“No.” Willa sniffled. “There’s nothing to figure out.”

Daniel blinked. “So you’re saying that after everything I’ve told you, that I love you, that I want to make this work—” He took a deep breath. “You’re just going to throw it all away?”

Willa’s face crumpled. “It can never work. It just can’t.” Then she ran out of the room.

Daniel didn’t chase after her. There was no point. He felt as if his heart had shattered into a million pieces. He’d been so convinced Willa would reciprocate his feelings he hadn’t considered any possibility that she’d reject him like this.

Getting up, he shut his door and locked it, anger making his movements jerky. God, he was an idiot! He’d warned himself,

and Uncle James had warned him, too. But he'd been too stubborn to listen.

Now he'd let his heart get broken. Again. Willa was going back to New York, and what he'd thought they'd had together had been destroyed because he'd opened his big mouth.

Groaning, Daniel dropped his face into his hands, knowing this was one heartbreak he would never fully recover from.

## TWENTY-SIX

After Daniel had told her that he loved her, Willa had avoided him as much as she could when living in his house. Daniel had also avoided her, although she'd felt his gaze on her when he'd thought she wasn't paying attention. The tension had even gotten to Bobby, who'd been extra grumpy the week prior to Willa flying to New York for her final interview.

The ride to the airport had been the worst part. Willa and Daniel had driven in almost complete silence the full hour there, only Bobby's rambling monologue in the backseat punctuating the silence. Then, when Daniel helped Willa with her luggage at the departure terminal, he shook her hand. Shook her hand! Like they were acquaintances sealing a business deal. Willa was so startled that he hadn't even hugged her she barely stammered her goodbyes to him and to Bobby.

"You take care," she whispered to Bobby as she hugged him tightly. "I'll miss you so much."

Bobby wrapped his arms around her neck and squeezed with that impossible strength children had. It brought tears to Willa's eyes.

She lingered, but Bobby soon got bored with hugs. When a cart came down the lane carrying passengers, Bobby yelled, "It's a train! Look!"

"That's not a train, bud," said Daniel, "but close enough." His gaze skittered across Willa's before pointedly fixing on the

crowd instead. “We don’t want to keep you. It’ll take you a while to get through security.”

Willa wanted to protest; she wanted never to leave this spot or these people. But she knew she couldn’t, so she swallowed her tears, said one last goodbye to Bobby, and walked away.

It was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do—even worse than saying goodbye to Robert and Stacey. At least she’d known they were together in heaven.

After arriving in New York, Willa checked into her hotel before deciding to go to Yoroshiku, a sushi place where she’d gone often with Robert, Stacey, and Bobby. It had become Willa’s favorite restaurant; she remembered how Stacey had surprised her with a small birthday party there a year ago.

Without Robert and Stacey, Willa didn’t have anyone to call to spend time with while she was here in New York. She had some friends who were more like the kind of friends you kept up with on Facebook but never got drinks with. They weren’t *real* friends. And at the moment, Willa didn’t want to spend time with people who didn’t know her.

Besides, she could go to a restaurant alone. There was no law that said a woman couldn’t eat dinner alone.

“Willa!” said Bonnie, one of Yoroshiku’s waitresses. “I haven’t seen you here in forever. Where have you been hiding?”

“If you can believe it, I’ve been in Texas for the past two months.”

Bonnie goggled at her. “Jesus, why? Girl, you need a drink. Lemme get you your favorite plum wine. I know how you love that stuff.”

Willa thanked Bonnie and glanced at the menu, which had changed somewhat since she’d last been here. She inhaled the smell of fresh fish and miso, her stomach rumbling with hunger. She desperately needed not only some plum wine, but some tempura and an entire plate of her favorite sushi: tuna, yellow tail, and eel.

“I’m surprised you’re here by yourself,” said Bonnie as she placed the plum wine in front of Willa. “Where are your friends and their baby?”

Deciding she didn’t want to answer any painful questions, Willa lied, “They’re out of town right now.”

“Aw, too bad. That little boy is a cutie.”

When Willa got her meal, she ate a few rolls, only to discover that the food she’d once loved didn’t taste the same. It wasn’t that the restaurant had gone downhill, but for some reason, the sushi seemed tasteless to her. Even a larger amount of wasabi burning her tongue wasn’t enough to wake up her taste buds.

Had Texas—and Daniel—really changed her that much? What was wrong with her, anyway?

Willa hated that she’d hurt Daniel, but he didn’t understand that her staying in Texas wasn’t an option. She’d known that for a fact ever since she’d been a kid trying to fit in among the people of her hometown and failing miserably. At least in New York, she wasn’t considered some oddball.

“Something wrong with the food?” said Bonnie.

Willa was already full despite having only eaten about a third of the food so elegantly presented on the combo platter. “I guess I wasn’t as hungry as I thought. Could I get a box for everything?”

Willa swallowed the last of her wine and walked back to the hotel. As she opened the door to her room with her key card, she looked around and realized she didn’t have a fridge, and she stood there a moment with the box in her hand, feeling stupid. Her face cleared and she grabbed her key card. Then she headed down the elevator and back outside and gave the rest of her meal to a homeless man. Returning to her room, she watched TV until she was tired enough to get ready for bed.

Her thoughts inevitably strayed to Daniel and to Bobby. She missed them already, so much so that she picked up her phone and almost called Daniel. She could tell him she was calling to talk to Bobby. She shook her head at herself; he’d hear the lie



in her voice. Besides, Bobby would already be asleep. She'd be better off waiting until tomorrow.

She put her phone back down and turned off the lights. Sleep eluded her. The sounds of Manhattan kept her awake long into the night: honking cabs, people shouting, and the buzz of the city all combined together into a deafening noise that crept in even through the white sound of the fan unit by the window. She missed the quiet of a country night. She'd gotten so used to listening to the crickets singing her to sleep she hadn't realized how much she'd miss them now.

"You're being ridiculous," Willa muttered to herself. This was New York—her home. She was just tired and jet-lagged.

Closing her eyes, she finally fell into a restless sleep that ended too soon with the sound of her phone's alarm clock.





The final interview went off without a hitch. Considering all the roadblocks she'd overcome to get to this point, Willa had been shocked that everything had fallen into place so easily. It almost felt like fate.

"I'll make my decision within the next day or two," said Grayson. "Expect a phone call soon."

While Willa would be in New York for the next two days, she half-expected that Grayson wouldn't make a decision until next week. He didn't seem like the type of guy to care that he was making anyone wait on pins and needles for his decision.

He called the day after her interview.

"You're my number one choice, and I want to offer you the job," Grayson said without preamble.

Willa couldn't believe it. It seemed unreal that after everything, she'd gotten the job. And yet, as she sank down onto the hotel bed after hanging up, she wasn't jumping up and down with excitement. She simply felt ... nothing. Or if she felt anything, it was confusion that she didn't feel happy.

The next day, she met with Grayson at Sensation. Wearing his usual immaculate suit and tie, Grayson cut an intimidating figure, even when Willa already knew she was his number one choice.

"Good, you're here. We have about half an hour before my next meeting." Grayson typed something on his phone before turning his attention to Willa. "What questions do you have for me?"

"You said you wanted to talk about the job duties. Did they change since you posted the job?"

"Not change so much as more things have been added on. We recently had one of our best employees move away, so you'll be taking on her duties for the time being."

Willa frowned. "Why not hire someone else to fill that position?"

Grayson grimaced. “Because I don’t want to spend the money,” he said frankly. “Besides, Megan only worked part-time. There’s no reason why you couldn’t take on her job as well. That is, if you really want to work here.” He cocked a questioning eyebrow.

Willa ignored the implication and asked for more specifics. He finally gave in and told her what the additional duties would be—some accounting, some calendaring, and anything else that needed to get done—which Willa could foresee adding an additional ten to twenty hours to her already packed forty-hour work week.

She should’ve been flattered that Grayson thought she could do the work, but she felt only a vague sense of disappointment, even unease.

*Why aren’t you more excited? This is your dream job. This is everything you’ve ever wanted. Stop moping, and get with the program, Willa!*

“If you want me to take on an additional workload,” she said, pulling herself firmly back into the conversation, “then I’d expect my salary to match the work.”

Willa had never negotiated for her salary in her life, but by the time the meeting ended, Grayson had agreed to adding ten percent more to her starting salary, not including possible bonuses. Willa left the meeting feeling both accomplished and still confused that she hadn’t officially accepted the position yet.

She’d be an utter fool to turn this chance down. Logically, she knew that, but it didn’t stop her from asking Grayson to let her give him her answer the next day.

She had only another day in New York—one more day to make a decision that would change her life forever.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

When Willa checked her phone for what felt like the thousandth time, only to see that Daniel hadn't called or texted, she realized how ridiculous she was being. She'd rejected him. She'd told him it could never work.

Of course he wouldn't call. It was strange, she thought, how much she wanted him *not* to consider her wishes. It wasn't fair to him, but there it was. It might make her fickle, but the heart was a strange thing.

"I'm being an idiot," she muttered as she dried her hair the following morning in the hotel. "What the hell am I waiting for?"

Anything that had been between her and Daniel was over. She'd done her level best to make that happen. So why hesitate to accept the job offer? This was her dream role in her dream city, and despite all the setbacks and complications on the road to getting here, it had all worked out perfectly. She should be celebrating. And she would, she promised herself. Before she lost her nerve, she called Grayson.

"I hope you're calling to tell me yes," the gallery owner said, not even bothering to say hello.

"I am. Calling you to tell you yes, I mean," stammered Willa.

There was a long pause. "Why do you sound like you just agreed to get your arm broken?"

"Did I? I'm just nervous," Willa found herself babbling. "I don't sleep well in hotels, so I'm tired, too. But I'm very excited and so grateful that you've chosen me." Willa did her

best to infuse her voice with excitement. She almost winced at how hollow her tone sounded in her own ears. She just hoped Grayson bought the spiel.

“Hmm,” his voice sounded back. “Well, I don’t care as long as you sign on the dotted line. Sensation needs you, and I’m not stupid enough to let somebody of your caliber get away. I’ll have my assistant email you the contract. I want you to start next week.”

Willa bit back a sharp inhale. So soon? “I don’t know if I can move that quickly.”

“From what you told me, you weren’t really living in Texas, though. You were just staying there temporarily, right? So there’s no reason why it should take you long to settle things. Just pack up your clothes and whatever else you took and come back here. I’ll see you next week. No excuses.”

Willa sat down heavily onto the bed, staring at her phone. In a way, Grayson was right. She’d been living at a place that was furnished with furniture (albeit cheap) while she’d been working for Stacey and Robert. Luckily, her lease had been up when she’d needed to take Bobby to Daniel, so she hadn’t had to worry about paying rent on an apartment she wasn’t living in.

She’d need to find a new place to live, though. She could contact her previous landlord, but that apartment would be a long commute to Sensation. Besides, she would be making just enough to get a semi-decent apartment now. She smiled wryly. Semi-decent in New York meant a tiny one-room studio with a small window if she were really lucky.

Willa sighed. She’d accepted her dream job. She’d be living in New York again. She needed to tell someone ... anyone. She considered calling her dad, but he’d just lecture her about going back to the big city.

She decided to text her New York friends and sent messages to five different people. She waited for responses, only to get one from a girl named CeCe saying, *I’m in Barbados right now, but nice to hear from you and congrats!*

Another girl, Ashley, called Willa right after that. “I haven’t heard from you in forever!” she gushed. “How have you been? I can’t believe you got a job at Sensation!”

Willa smiled for the first time that day. “I can’t believe it, either. I need to celebrate with somebody. I know it’s last-minute, but do you want to get drinks tonight?”

“I wish! But I have a work thing. We have this huge project, and we’re all working overtime to finish it. It’s super boring so I won’t go into detail.” Ashley paused and then asked, “How long are you staying? I could do something this weekend.”

After Willa explained she’d be back in Texas that weekend, she hung up, feeling disappointed and lonely. The other three people never responded to her messages, showing how good of friends they were.

Willa considered going out again on her own, but she found the idea depressing. She’d order room service, get some sleep, and then fly home tomorrow.

She winced at the thought. Home? She wasn’t going *home*. This was home—New York.

Suddenly, a wash of homesickness threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to talk to Daniel—to tell him about accepting the job, she told herself—so much that her heart ached.

Her thumb hovered over his number on her phone. She warred within herself between wanting to be honest with him and wanting to avoid hurting him further.

*He’ll be happy for me, but it’ll just be one more thing he’ll hate me for,* she told herself. And hadn’t she done enough already?

She couldn’t tell him. At least, not on the phone. She’d have to tell him when she got back, of course.

But he didn’t need her anymore—not for Bobby, at any rate. It was best this way. She was doing what she loved, and Daniel would return to his own life and continue to raise Bobby.

“I can’t keep moping inside this hotel room,” she muttered as she grabbed her purse. She’d wander around Manhattan all

day if it would help her get her mind off everything. Maybe she'd get drunk tonight while she watched bad movies and ate room service. Anything was preferable to this guilty feeling eating at her when she knew she hadn't done anything wrong.

By afternoon, Willa had resolved to stop feeling guilty for making her decision. This was her life, and Daniel didn't have any input. They'd been lovers—nothing more, nothing less.



## TWENTY-EIGHT

Daniel almost dropped the hand-painted sign he and Bobby had made (Bobby had provided the handprints in red and yellow paint) when Bobby spotted Willa walking toward them in the airport.

“Willa! Willa!”

Daniel kept one hand on the boy’s shoulder. The last thing anyone needed was him getting lost in the mass of people at the airport.

“Bobby!” Willa hurried through the crowd. She picked up Bobby with a laugh and hugged the little boy so hard, he tried to squirm from her arms.

“Put me down,” commanded Bobby, which Willa obeyed, only for him to cling to her legs as he usually did.

Daniel drank in Willa like she was water in the desert. Despite her rumpled clothes from traveling and the dark circles under her eyes, she was beautiful to him. He wished he could kiss her, but he knew that after what had happened, she wouldn’t welcome the embrace.

It was ridiculous how much he’d missed her. He only hoped that she’d missed him, too.

“How was your flight?” he said abruptly upon realizing he hadn’t said a word to her yet.

He could feel the awkwardness already building between them, and it didn’t help that Willa wouldn’t look him in the eye.

“It was fine. What, Bobby?”

“I made this.” Bobby pulled at the sign to show Willa.

She crouched down to be on the little boy’s level. “Did you? I love it. Those are your handprints, aren’t they?”

Bobby nodded as he patted the painted handprints. Bobby had “helped” with the sign, inasmuch as he’d made a mess and gotten covered in paint, but Daniel had made sure to paint the sign outside so they hadn’t made a mess in the house. Even though Daniel normally hated messes, he’d enjoyed painting with Bobby and helping the little boy press his hands against the poster.

“Were you a good boy while I was gone?” said Willa.

Bobby nodded solemnly. Daniel’s lips twitched: Bobby had been a good boy—until Daniel had told him no. But Daniel no longer got frustrated with the boy’s tantrums; they always ended once Bobby had gotten his frustrations out and tired himself in the process.

A man jostled Willa, reminding Daniel that they were in the airport, not the best place in the world to catch up. At least Willa only had a carry-on, so they didn’t have to deal with baggage claim. “Come on, pardner,” he said to Bobby. “Let’s go hitch up the horses and high-tail it outta here.”

“I want chicken nuggets!” the little boy crowed.

Although both he and Willa laughed, he could’ve sworn he saw her wince, like she hadn’t wanted to seem too happy. That thought made Daniel’s stomach sink.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said to her as they walked to the car.

Willa shot him a surprised glance, her cheeks reddening. “It’s nice to be back,” she said, not looking at him.

On the ride home, Daniel said a silent prayer of thanks that the preschooler couldn’t stop talking; otherwise, he and Willa would have had to fill the silence. Daniel desperately wanted to ask her what the end result of her job interview was. When

she hadn't texted him the whole time she'd been gone, he'd assumed she hadn't gotten the job.

She certainly didn't look excited, which only strengthened his belief that she hadn't been hired. He wanted her to be happy, truly he did. And if art made her happy, he wanted her to have that. But he also wanted her here, with him, with Bobby. He was almost ashamed to admit it, but part of him had been glad when she hadn't texted or called with good news.

Once they were home, Bobby occupied them both until all the airport excitement finally caught up with him, and he fell asleep. By the time Daniel was alone with Willa, he was about to burst with impatience, wanting to know what had happened in New York.

Willa sat down next to him on the couch, a tentative smile on her face. Daniel noted that she kept a safe distance between them, as if she was afraid he'd touch her if she got too close. It both amused and exasperated him.

"I wanted to tell you this in person," said Willa, "but I was offered the job." She took a deep breath. "And I accepted the offer."

Daniel was sure he'd heard her wrong. If she'd gotten the job, she would have texted him immediately in her excitement. And if she'd accepted the offer, she would have called ahead to soften the blow before he had to see her again. Or maybe she would have decided not to come back at all. The fact that she was here now, sitting on his couch, but wasn't staying, didn't make any sense.

"You got the job," he repeated numbly.

Her smile wavered. "I did. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before now, but I thought it would be better if I waited. I didn't want to drop it on you over the phone."

Anger stirred inside him. Anger at her that she'd made this decision without his input, but also anger at himself for expecting her to consult him in the first place. Willa wasn't his. Though he'd said he loved her, she'd made it clear she

didn't want this life with him. Despite knowing all that, her words hit as hard as if she'd punched him.

"Congratulations," he said, lying through his teeth. "I know how hard you worked for this position."

She wouldn't look at him as she added, "I'm moving back there in a week, too, so it's going to be kind of crazy around here."

He stared at her. One week? She'd drop this town, drop Bobby—drop him!—in a week without a single regret? The anger he'd tried to keep at bay boiled over.

"So that's it, then? You're done with everyone and everything in this town?" He got up, shaking his head, not sure if he was more upset with himself or with her. "Nothing I said or did mattered, did it?"

"What are you talking about?" Her cheeks were flushed now, and she dug her fingers into the couch cushions. "Of course, I'll miss everyone, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't go to New York or accept the job I've worked so hard to get."

He huffed out a breath. "I don't get how you could be so selfish. I really don't."

"Me?" Her jaw dropped.

"You didn't even consider telling me that you'd gotten the job offer, let alone accepted it, before now? I didn't deserve that courtesy?"

"I told you I didn't want to do it over the phone."

"You didn't want to tell me, period."

When she winced, he knew he'd struck at the truth. If she hadn't had to come back here to get her things, she wouldn't have set foot in Texas again. That realization hurt more than he could say.

"I just didn't know how to tell you. I know we left things in a weird place." She wrung her hands, her voice shaking a little now. "I didn't want to hurt you again."

“So you thought keeping it from me wouldn’t hurt me? Come on, Willa. Don’t act like this was about sparing my feelings.”

Her eyes flashed. “Now you’re just being an asshole. I’m going in a week, so you might as well accept it.”

“I can accept it, but what about Bobby? You’re just going to up and leave and think he won’t notice?” His voice rose despite his best intentions.

Guilt assailed him when he saw her eyes shining with tears. But she didn’t let them fall—he knew she wouldn’t. Not his brave, stubborn Willa. She refused to show weakness, the same way he did.

“I hate the thought of leaving Bobby, but it’s for the best. *You’re* his uncle. I came here with him so you could be his father. Do you think I’d abandon him if I didn’t think he’d be loved and cared for? What kind of a monster do you think I am?”

“I never said you were a monster,” he growled before softening his voice. “Willa, I love you. You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted this much.”

She froze. “Please, don’t.”

“Don’t, what? Tell you the truth? I love you.” He felt like his heart was going to burst from his chest right then. “I want you to stay. I want us to be a family.”

She looked like a rabbit he’d seen once, caught in a trap. Her lower lip trembled. “Why can’t you just be happy for me?”

“I would be.” He stepped so close to her that only a few inches separated them. “If I thought running off to New York was what you really wanted.”

Her anger returned. How many times was she going to have to tell him this? As she stood up, she put her shoulders back, her chin up. “If you refuse to accept what I’ve said, then that’s your problem. I kept thinking I’d made a mistake in accepting this job. That I should stay here with you.” She swiped angrily at the tears on her face. “But obviously, I didn’t make the wrong choice. You’ve shown me staying here with you

wouldn't make me happy, if this is how you act when you don't get your way."

Daniel stared at her. He felt like a bug nailed to the wall. Because she was right. Now he was just angry with himself: angry that he'd let the rules fall by the wayside. Angry that he'd let his heart get engaged when he'd warned himself over and over. He started to speak, and then stopped himself. Mostly he was angry that he couldn't control this situation like he controlled everything else in his life.

"I'm going to bed," said Willa tiredly. "Good night."

He flinched when he heard her door shut and lock. He wanted to wrench it open, apologize, get on his knees and beg her to stay. He wanted to rail at her, demand to know why she wouldn't love him. Couldn't love him.

Instead, he went to his own bedroom and shut the door, knowing he'd never have Willa in his bed again. And soon, he'd never have her in his house—or his life.

## TWENTY-NINE

A week passed in the blink of an eye. Willa spent the time saying goodbye to all the friends she'd made: DeeDee and Izzy, Sarah, even Uncle James. DeeDee had cried when Willa had told her that she was leaving so soon, but she'd been the most supportive of Willa's decision to return to New York.

"How's Daniel handling it?" DeeDee had asked.

"Badly," was all Willa would tell her.

After their fight, things had gone from awkward to painful. Daniel only spoke to her when necessary, and she did the same. She was too angry with him to care that she was being petty. The only reason they managed to remain civil to each other was for Bobby's sake.

Bobby had clung to Willa even harder this past week. She'd been back and forth from New York these past couple of months, but this time there would be no coming back, and perhaps Bobby could sense that. One evening, she'd been taking a bath when Bobby had thrown a tantrum because Daniel hadn't let Bobby go into the bathroom with Willa. Willa had finished up her bath in record time so she could console the frustrated little boy.

Guilt filled her every time she thought of how she was leaving Bobby behind, despite knowing she was leaving him with his own uncle. Willa might hate Daniel for what he'd said to her, but she knew he loved his nephew and wanted the best for the little boy.

Early on the morning of Willa's flight to New York, she sat in her art shed to finish up the scrapbook she'd been putting together for Bobby. Between seeing people, wrapping up her responsibilities here in town, and caring for Bobby, she'd barely had time to finish the project. She was determined, though, to give something to Bobby that he could look back on, especially when he was older.

The first part of the scrapbook was dedicated to Robert and Stacey. Willa had gathered all the photos she could find and had ordered prints of them. They'd arrived just in time to put them in the scrapbook.

Willa smiled through her tears as she looked at one of her favorite photos: Robert, Stacey, and Bobby at the Bronx Zoo in front of the lion exhibit. Bobby was pointing at a huge lion lounging in the background, and Robert and Stacey were both smiling at their son without realizing Willa was taking a picture. It was such a lovely candid moment.

Her heart ached. How she wished those two hadn't been taken away. She wished she'd never had to bring Bobby to Texas at all. It wasn't fair to him, losing his parents so young. He'd never remember them. He'd have to rely on other people to create memories for him.

Willa wiped the tears away as she began to cut out a photo of herself and Bobby during the first week Willa had worked as his nanny. Willa sat on the floor with the newborn in her lap, the two of them staring into each other's eyes, infant Bobby's eyes wide with wonder. Willa couldn't help but think the girl in the photo looked so young and innocent, even though that photo had been taken only two years ago. That girl had had no idea how things could change in an instant.

"Willa, you'll need to leave for the airport soon," said Daniel through the door of the shed.

Daniel would be staying at the house with Bobby while Uncle James drove her to the airport. Willa had asked Uncle James for the ride when she'd last seen him, mostly to avoid another awkward scene with Daniel. At least this way, she could say



her goodbyes at the house instead of trying to do them at the airport.

Willa started. She looked at the time on her phone and swore under her breath. “Almost finished! Be in the house in five minutes.”

She heard a faint grunt and then departing footsteps. She rolled her eyes. Men were so annoying when they were mad.

But Willa’s annoyance melted away when it was time to leave. Her heart splintered as she picked up Bobby and hugged him hard.

“You’ll be a good boy for your Uncle Danny, won’t you?”

Bobby frowned at her. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m sad because I’ll miss you.”

Bobby hugged her, and she thought her heart might burst into pieces. Soon he wriggled in her arms, wanting down. Willa set him down with reluctance. It was partially because she didn’t want to leave him, but also because she didn’t want to face the man standing awkwardly in front of her.

She crouched down and handed Bobby the scrapbook she’d just finished. “I made this for you. So you can look back and remember me and your mom and dad.”

Bobby opened the book and turned a few pages. When his hand started to crumple one of the corners, though, Willa gently pried the book out of his fingers and held it out to Daniel instead.

“Maybe wait a while before giving it to him again,” she said, trying to keep her voice light.

Daniel was standing there with his arms crossed, face like a thundercloud. He uncrossed his arms, reached out, and took the scrapbook without a word.

She knew she’d hurt him by taking the job without consulting him, but she refused to feel guilty about that. He wasn’t her husband or even her boyfriend; he didn’t get to have a say in her life decisions.

“Thank you for everything,” she said sincerely. “You’ll post on Instagram so I can see what Bobby’s doing?” She’d managed to extract that promise earlier from Daniel, despite his hatred of all things relating to social media.

He nodded. Then he shoved the scrapbook under his arm and held out his hand to her. “Good luck. I hope the job and everything goes well.”

She took his hand and shook it, trying to ignore the electricity that zinged her anytime they touched. Suddenly, she wanted to throw herself into his arms and tell him she didn’t want to leave him.

Tears sprang to her eyes. “I’m sorry for everything, too,” she whispered.

Daniel’s hard expression softened. “So am I.”

She wanted to say more, but Uncle James was calling from the car. “Better get a move on, little lady, or you’ll miss your flight!”

Daniel picked up her luggage, waiting by the front door, and carried it down the steps to put it in the trunk. Willa kissed Bobby once more then let him go.

“See you later, alligator,” she said.

Bobby waved. “In a while, crocodile.”

Willa laughed and cried at the same time. Robert had always told Bobby *see you later, alligator* when he’d gone to work, and Bobby had learned to respond with *in a while, crocodile*. It almost felt like Robert and Stacey were there, seeing Willa off and telling her that their son would be well cared for with his uncle.

As Uncle James drove off, she tried not to notice that Daniel, with Bobby next to him, stood and watched the car drive away. She wiped at the tears on her cheeks, hoping Uncle James wouldn’t notice them.

If he did notice, he was smart enough not to say anything.

When they arrived at the airport, she told him he didn’t need to come inside. She wanted to be alone, anyway.

“Best of luck to you, then,” he said, for once not calling her “little lady.” He touched her shoulder. “And thank you for loving that boy so much and showing my nephew the ropes. Without you, I don’t know what Danny would’ve done.”

She smiled sadly. “He’s a smart guy. He would’ve figured it out.”

As she was about to get out of the car, Uncle James said, “I don’t know what happened between you and my nephew,” he held up a hand to stop whatever she might say and continued, “and I know it ain’t none of my business, but I’ve never seen him get like this over a woman.”

Willa stared at him in surprise.

Uncle James rubbed the back of his neck. “All’s I’m sayin’ is, if you have any feelings for Danny, don’t let your own fear—or stubbornness—get in your way.” His lips tightened. “Take it from an old man who might have done something similar when he was your age.”

Impulsively, Willa threw her arms around Uncle James and kissed his weathered cheek. “Thank you. Goodbye.”

She got her luggage out of the trunk before Uncle James could get out to help her. Once inside, she dashed the tears from her eyes, but they wouldn’t stop. She cried all the way through security until she reached her gate, not caring that people stared at her.

## THIRTY

**B**obby burst into tears about five minutes after Willa and Uncle James drove off. Feeling rather like he'd enjoy crying, too, Daniel picked up Bobby with a sigh. He patted Bobby's back, telling him over and over again that everything would be all right.

"Wiiiiiiiilla!" Bobby hiccupped and cried harder. His small face turned bright red as he cried so hard Daniel was almost afraid the boy would hyperventilate.

Daniel kept his voice calm and soothing despite the turmoil building inside him.

"You're okay, buddy. You're okay. I'm here. Don't cry, buddy."

Bobby wouldn't stop crying, though. Taking the boy inside the house, Daniel paced with him in his arms.

God, he wished Willa had stayed.

He shook his head. He couldn't dwell on things that weren't meant to happen. Willa had made her choice, and he'd have to accept it. Even if the sight of her driving away in that car had wrenched his heart in two.

He'd told himself he'd say goodbye to her without making it harder on her. It had also been why he'd barely spoken to her the entire week after their disagreement. He'd told himself he was trying not to hurt her, but he knew that had been a lie.

*You're a coward, he thought bitterly. You should've been on your hands and knees, begging her to stay.*

It didn't matter now, though, did it? She was gone forever. And he had to focus on Bobby, not on his own broken heart.

Bobby's crying had quieted somewhat, but fat tears still rolled down the boy's cheeks. Not sure what else to do, Daniel began humming. It soon turned into a lullaby his mom used to sing to him, one he hadn't thought about in ages.

"You're safe / you're sound / don't worry / I'm here, baby," he sang over and over until his voice was hoarse.

Finally, Bobby calmed enough that Daniel could distract him with his trains. Bobby pushed his trains around the track, mumbling softly to himself. Daniel just hoped these crying fits didn't continue to happen. He'd forget about Willa eventually—right?

Daniel heard a car drive up. In the next moment, Sarah came through the front door, looking harried.

"Is she gone already?" she cried.

Daniel nodded dully. "I thought you'd already said goodbye?"

"I told her I'd see her off, but there was an issue with one of the customers, and I got sidetracked—" Sarah sighed deeply. "Well, I guess that's it, then. She's gone back to New York, and we'll never see her again."

Daniel wasn't exactly in the mood to go over all this with Sarah, of all people. He shrugged a shoulder.

"Willa never wanted to stay," he said.

"I don't really believe that. Maybe in the beginning, but you don't make friends like she did without reconsidering your original decision." Sarah's sharp-eyed gaze looked over Daniel, and she seemed to change the subject. "You look terrible."

For the first time in what felt like years, Daniel barked out a laugh. "Thanks. I was just about to get myself a beer. You want one?"

"At three o'clock in the afternoon?" Sarah smiled wryly. "Sure, why not?"

The two of them, a strange pair, sat on the porch while Bobby played on the lawn. Sarah sat on the porch swing, rocking gently, and Daniel sat himself down on the top step and stared out over the horizon.

“She was a great gal,” said Sarah. “I’m sorry she ended up leaving.”

Daniel snorted. “You make it sound like she died.”

“You’re actin’ like she did, son. No, no, don’t get your dander up. I don’t mean to make you mad. I’m an old woman, you know. You have to cut me slack.”

“You ain’t that old.”

“Don’t get cheeky.” Her smile returned before fading. “I really thought Willa would stay. After that fundraiser she put together for your birthday ...” Sarah looked as if she wanted to say something else, but she drank her beer instead.

“If you have something to ask me,” said Daniel, “you might as well say it.”

“You’re as subtle as your uncle. Fine, here’s my question: did you tell her you loved her, or not?”

Daniel continued to stare into the horizon, hearing the distant bellows of his cows. He inhaled the familiar scent of hay and manure, noting for the first time that it didn’t calm him like it usually did.

He loved this farm. He loved this town. He’d never thought he’d need anything else, until Willa had shown up on his doorstep.

“I did tell her I loved her. She decided that wasn’t enough for her,” he said quietly.

Sarah inhaled. “And she still left? I’m surprised.”

Daniel finally looked over at Sarah. “Why? Willa doesn’t feel the same way, and she told me so. There’s nothing mysterious about it.”

“Now, there’s a bald-faced lie if I ever heard one. Willa doesn’t love you? Horseshit—excuse my language, but that’s

the only word I could think of.”

Daniel’s lips twitched before he sighed. “You’re wrong. She doesn’t love me. Sorry if I’m more likely to believe *her* than you.”

“I saw the way she looked at you. And she threw that fundraiser for you! What kind of a woman does that for a man she doesn’t love?” Sarah muttered something under her breath. “Here I was, thinking you were being a fool man, when the fool here is the woman, letting her fear run her off. Shows what I know.”

Daniel watched Bobby dig up a hunk of grass. “I appreciate you coming out here, Sarah, and for thinking that about me. But it wasn’t meant to be with me and Willa. I need to focus on Bobby. He’s my priority now.”

“I’ll stay here for a bit, if you don’t mind.”

Daniel shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

By the time Daniel had cleaned Bobby up and gotten him his dinner, Uncle James had returned from taking Willa to the airport. Daniel could hear him and Sarah talking in low voices. When Daniel glanced out the window, he was surprised to see his uncle and Sarah sitting on the porch swing together.

He was even further surprised when Sarah kissed Uncle James on the cheek before hurrying away. Well, at least one couple was getting it right, thought Daniel wryly.

After dinner, Bobby picked up the scrapbook Willa had given him.

“Do you want to look at it? How about you sit on my lap, and I’ll turn the pages?” said Daniel.

Bobby sat on his lap, and Daniel began to look through what Willa had put together. His heart hurt when he saw the photos of his brother and Stacey with Bobby. He realized, the thought filled with sadness, that everyone in his life had left him. His parents, Robert, and now, Willa.

At least he had Bobby.

“That’s Mommy,” said the little boy as he pointed to Stacey, “and Daddy.”

“It is,” said Daniel. “And they both loved you so much. When you were born, your dad called me and was so-o-o excited.” He drew out the word the same way he’d heard Willa do it while reading a book to Bobby. “I’d never heard him talk like that.” Daniel smiled at the memory. Robert had almost not been able to tell Daniel anything beyond saying over and over again, “I have a son!”

He hugged the boy a little closer to his side. “I know your parents didn’t want to leave you so soon, but you’ll see them again. But while you’re growing up, they’re watching you from heaven.”

Bobby tried to pull a photo off the page, which Daniel stopped just in time before Bobby could begin to undo all of Willa’s hard work.

The next few pages were photos of Willa and Bobby, including pictures Willa had taken here in Texas, or asked him to take with her phone. Daniel smiled when he saw the photo of the two sitting on the tractor, Bobby “driving.” That had been a fun day, Daniel reflected.

Bobby pointed to one of the photos and looked up at Daniel. “Where’s Willa?”

“She had to go home. But we’ll talk to her soon,” lied Daniel.

He let out a sigh of relief when Bobby decided he was bored with the scrapbook and wanted down to play with his toys.

Later that night, after a bath, when Daniel put Bobby to bed, Bobby’s lip quivered as he said, “Willa?”

“She’s not here, buddy, but I’m here. You need to go to sleep now.”

Daniel rubbed the boy’s back, and soon he was asleep. And before he forgot, Daniel placed the scrapbook on the little bookshelf in Bobby’s room, grateful to Willa that she’d thought to preserve such precious memories for Bobby.



## THIRTY-ONE

Daniel didn't sleep that night. He stared at the ceiling, thinking about Willa, thinking about when she'd been in this very bed with him. His body ached for her as much as his heart did.

He thought of what Sarah had said to him earlier. Was she right, that Willa did love him but was too scared to admit it?

Daniel punched one of his pillows. *Don't be a fool*, he thought. *She told you to your face that she didn't want to stay here with you.*

Only idiots refused to take somebody at their literal word.

Yet he missed talking to her about his day. Normally, he'd tell her all about the tetchy mare he'd just gotten, and how he'd go about getting her tamed. He'd tell her about how the corn was growing, about how some pipe or something had broken, and Daniel had had to fix it.

Willa would turn over onto her side and listen with real interest. She'd probably suggest something like, *give that mare lots of sugar cubes*. And then she'd tell Daniel about her day. They used to talk together like they were married. Just the thought of that word sent a pang through Daniel's heart.

He knew now, when all hope was lost, that Willa was the one woman he would've married in a heartbeat.

It was a long time before he was able to fall asleep.

The week passed slowly. Daniel found himself running into reminders of Willa everywhere: a hair on his pillow, an almost

empty bottle of shampoo in the shower, her leftover curry she'd made that last weekend.

He saw her on the porch, her smile wide and her curls bouncing as Bobby ran toward her. He saw her waving at him as he came in from the fields.

She was like a ghost, haunting his every step. No matter what he did—washing his pillowcase, throwing out her shampoo, feeding Bobby her leftovers—she stuck around. He was half-tempted to bring a priest to his house to exorcise the damn place.

That Saturday, Daniel headed into town to get some sacks of seed, Bobby in tow as always. At the store, he ran into DeeDee. She waved at him despite his best attempt to avoid her. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to her about Willa.

“How y'all doin'?” I'm so glad I ran into you both. I was wondering if y'all needed anything, now that Willa has gone back to New York,” she said.

“We're fine. Willa cooked a bunch of meals that she froze before she left.”

“Of course she did.” DeeDee sighed. “I'm so sad she went back. I thought for sure she'd stay ...”

The only reason Daniel didn't turn around and walk out was that his mother in heaven would skin him alive for being so rude to another lady. So, he gritted his teeth and hoped DeeDee wouldn't talk his ear off.

“Hey there, Bobby. How you doin'?” said DeeDee, bending down to address the little boy. “You must've grown since I last saw you, you're so big!”

Bobby smiled shyly, keeping close to Daniel. Bobby had been clingy since Willa had left, although Daniel hadn't minded. He'd needed the company as much as Bobby needed to feel safe and secure.

Standing upright again, she added, “Well, I'm glad to see you two doing so well.”

Daniel tilted his cowboy hat, but as he was about to leave, DeeDee said, "Wait! I meant to tell you something. Or, I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but I think you should know," she babbled.

Daniel turned back, raising a speculative eyebrow. What in the world would DeeDee have to say to him?

DeeDee chewed her bottom lip, smudging her bright pink lipstick. "It's just, at our last ladies' night, I might've gotten Willa a li'l tipsy. Only a little bit, mind you."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"That's because I'm right terrible at telling stories. Or so Doug says." DeeDee snorted. "Well, I got Willa talking after she'd had a few, and I asked her point blank: 'Are you in love with Daniel Gunn?'"

Daniel sucked in a breath. His heart hammered so hard he could barely hear DeeDee's next words.

"And that sly thing, she just blushed, said maybe she was, maybe she wasn't, but it didn't matter. She wasn't supposed to stay here. When I asked her to give me a yes or no answer, she just said, 'Just because you love someone doesn't mean you're meant to be together.'"

Daniel couldn't breathe. Willa loved him. It made him want to shout to the heavens.

"This really happened?" he said.

DeeDee nodded. "I didn't think anything of it at the time because I assumed she'd tell you ...". She patted his arm. "If you want to get her back, show her she belongs here."

Daniel didn't hear DeeDee's next words because he was too busy making plans. He left the store without his sacks of seed, he was so worked up. Bobby chattered in the backseat as Daniel drove back to the house, but he was thinking too hard to notice what the boy was saying.

"DeeDee's right," he said to Bobby that evening as they ate dinner together. "I need to give Willa a reason to stay. Not just that, but something only she can do."

“Willa likes to play trains,” said Bobby before accidentally knocking his carrots onto the floor.

The entire town needed Willa, Daniel realized. And as he lay awake that night, he didn’t stew about how he’d never see her again. He thought instead of what he could do to give her a reason to return.

He didn’t sleep a wink, but by the morning, he’d decided he needed to start an art center with Willa as the director. A developed arts program was something the town was sorely lacking, and Willa would be perfect for the job.

And she would have time to do her own art, which she didn’t have at her current job, he was certain. He’d heard Willa talking to her boss about potentially working close to sixty hours a week. How could she stay with a job that would lead to burnout so quickly?

Daniel hadn’t spoken to Willa since she’d left, but the next night, he decided to bite the bullet and text her. He also might’ve wanted to show her what she was missing.

Smiling, he took a photo of Bobby sleeping along with a photo of the drawing Daniel had made earlier with Bobby’s help. It was nothing special, just stick figures, but it was stick figures that represented Willa, Daniel, and Bobby. Together, as a family.

*Bobby misses you, he texted. He wanted to show you a drawing he did (I might’ve helped a little).*

Daniel waited for her response. She finally texted back a few minutes later with, *I miss him so much. Tell him I’ll call tomorrow!*

Nothing about the drawing, and nothing about missing Daniel. Well, that just meant Daniel would have to play dirty. He’d get this little miss back into Texas even if it killed him.

He called the diner the next morning. “Hey, Sarah,” he said when the diner owner picked up on the line. “What are your thoughts on helping me start an art center?”

“Are you drunk?” was her bland response.

“Nope. Just thinking of a way to get Willa back, that’s all.”

“Oh! Well, then. That sounds like a mighty clever way to lure her back. Why you calling me, though? I’m hardly the person with money or connections.”

“Maybe not, but you’re the smartest person in town.”

He heard Sarah chuckle. “Save the flattery for your little lady. Of course I’ll help you. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

Daniel spent the morning making plans, calling people, and researching everything he could think of. He knew he was neglecting his farm—something he could only afford for a few hours because while planting could wait a day, his animals certainly couldn’t fend for themselves—but he didn’t care.

He was going to do everything in his power to get Willa back.

## THIRTY-TWO

Willa wasn't sure how she was still standing, she was so tired. From the moment she'd come into work on that first Monday, Grayson had been running her ragged. There simply weren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything he wanted done.

In her first two months on the job, Willa had catalogued over one hundred pieces of art, had created a brand-new marketing campaign for the gallery's next opening, and had put together test versions of the gallery's website for Grayson to look over.

Willa had known she was signing up for a job that would involve a lot of work, but she hadn't realized it would be this crazy. She got to work at seven in the morning and didn't get home until close to eight or nine o'clock at night. She only had time to eat dinner, shower, and collapse into bed.

"Have you sent the invitations for the opening to the printer?" said Grayson. "We have to have those mailed out by Monday."

"Yes, I just sent the order over. I'll pick them up on my way home."

"Good. Then you can stuff them at your place. Or better yet, come in on Saturday to do it here."

Willa didn't say anything to that suggestion. If she was going to work on the weekends, she was at the very least going to do it from home. Sighing silently, she forced herself to focus on the graphics she was working on for the gallery's opening.

Willa was forced to work through her lunch, only stopping for five minutes to wolf down a protein bar and Gatorade, before

getting ready for the afternoon's meeting. She didn't know what satanic person scheduled a meeting on a Friday afternoon. Probably Grayson himself, she thought sourly.

*What are you complaining about?* she told herself. *You're getting paid to do what you love! So what if the hours are long? It'll be worth it.*

That was what Willa told herself when she got a text from Grayson at midnight, asking her about the invitations (which she had picked up, as she had told him). She told herself it was worth it when Grayson had her pick up his coffee order every morning, or when Grayson rejected all of her logo designs and told her to come up with something better.

Willa spent that Saturday at home stuffing envelopes with the invitations. It wasn't exactly how she'd imagined spending her weekend, especially now that she was back in New York. She'd hoped to get that drink with Ashley, but Ashley was apparently as busy as Willa.

After spending six hours stuffing and sealing envelopes, Willa's hands were as tired as her brain. She never wanted to look at another envelope again. Worst of all, she wasn't done: she still had to print off all the address labels and stick them on, not to mention putting a stamp on each one.

Willa got up to make herself another pot of coffee. As she poured creamer into her mug, she couldn't help thinking about the last cup of coffee she'd had at Daniel's house. She'd gotten used to his crappy coffee, she thought with a sad smile. When she'd gotten her usual gourmet coffee at her favorite coffee shop here in New York, she'd almost missed the taste of Daniel's brew.

Willa felt a pang in her heart. She didn't just miss Daniel's terrible coffee—she missed him, and she missed Bobby. She missed getting up in the morning and seeing both of their faces.

Despite it being New York, her apartment felt so quiet without anyone else living with her. The sounds from the street below didn't count, either. She kept listening for Bobby calling out her name, or Daniel telling her dinner was ready.

She kept waking up from dreams where she was kissing Daniel, where he picked her up in his arms again, carried her, and laid her on his bed as he covered her body. Those dreams were the most painful, and Willa would wake up frustrated and ridiculously turned on.

That night, Willa had just finished her bath when she got a text from Daniel. Her heart sped up, even though she told herself she was being ridiculous.

She smiled through sudden tears as she looked at the photo of a sleeping Bobby that Daniel had sent with the text. Then she was laughing through her tears when she saw the terrible drawing he'd made.

*I'm just tired*, she told herself, unsettled by her own tears. *Tired and overworked. Besides, Daniel made it clear that we were over, and I told him a hundred times why I wasn't staying. Move on already, Willa.*

On Monday, she brought the large box of finished invitations to work so they could be mailed from the building's mailroom.

"Are those the invitations?" Grayson entered Willa's office and picked up the few extra invitations she'd had made but hadn't stuffed.

"Yep, and they're all ready to be mailed."

She looked up to see Grayson frowning at the invitations. "Were all of them like this?" He held one up to her.

Willa frowned. "Yes ...?"

"You should've let me look at them. You'll have to get them reprinted. This isn't the right shade of blue."

Willa let out a startled laugh, sure that Grayson was joking. When she saw he wasn't, she gaped at him. "I spent all day Saturday stuffing those invitations and addressing them."

"So? I told you to make sure the blue was the right blue, and you didn't." Grayson tossed the invitation back into the box. "Get them reprinted and mailed out by the end of today."

Willa sat down heavily in her office chair. After the shock wore off, she felt anger rising, and she was greatly tempted to



kick a hole in the wall. Maybe she could throw her laptop—and that stupid box of invites—at Grayson’s head. Reprint them all? He was insane. She’d have to redo all of the envelopes, too, she realized in dismay.

Ten hours’ worth of work, down the drain. She already had so much to do today, too. She couldn’t afford to redo this stupid project.

Her phone buzzed: another text from Daniel. When she opened the message, she couldn’t help a smile despite her sour mood.

*Bobby’s fourth birthday is coming up. I need your help thinking of party ideas.*

Then, a second text: *I hope you can come for the party.*

Bobby’s birthday was in a month, wasn’t it? The thought of not being there for his fourth birthday tore at her heart.

But most of all, she realized in a flash of clarity that she didn’t just want to go back for Bobby’s birthday. Willa had clung so tightly to this dream and the idea of New York for most of her life that it truly terrified her when it started to slip away. She’d been so afraid to lose it that only now did she realize she could leave New York without leaving her dream—because that dream had changed. And as she accepted that fact, a vision of what her life could be—of what she wanted it to be—flooded her mind like the most detailed of watercolors. In it, she saw Bobby and Daniel and herself on the farm. They were happy together.

She’d spent so long telling herself she didn’t belong in Texas because she hadn’t felt accepted there as a child or a teenager. But she was a grown woman now. A woman who’d truly started to fit in. She had real friends in Texas. A community of people who supported her.

Most of all she had love.

She *loved* Daniel.

Willa suddenly remembered the words on the antique sampler in Daniel’s front room, the one she’d noticed that first day

she'd met him. *Home is where the heart is. Heart is where home is.*

Her home was in Texas—with Daniel, and with Bobby, too.

She didn't need this stupid job. What the hell had she been thinking?

Taking the box of invitations with her, she went straight to Grayson's office. He glared at her as she came into his office without knocking.

“What are you—?”

Willa tossed the box of invitations onto his desk. “You know what? If you want these reprinted, you can do it yourself. I'm done here. It's not worth the money, which isn't even that much here in New York. And you know what I've realized? I don't want this job. Actually, I don't *need* it.”

Grayson stared up at her before his eyes narrowed. “Is that so? Then you're fired, and I'll be sure to let every gallery in the city know that you're insane.”

Willa smiled brightly. “Go for it.” Maybe she'd been too stubborn to see all the reasons she had to stay when she left Texas, but she wasn't too stubborn to admit to all the reasons she had to go back.

Gathering her things, Willa sailed out without a backward glance. She started laughing as she stood outside Sensation, thinking about her next move. Then she remembered she hadn't answered Daniel's text.

She dug out her phone. *I'll be there*, was her reply. She thought about telling him she was coming back for good, but she decided she'd rather surprise him. Time to make a phone call. She dialed the number from memory.

“Hey, Sarah,” she said when the diner owner picked up, “I need your help.”

## THIRTY-THREE

Daniel stood back and surveyed the results that all of his and so many other people's hard work had created. The Robert Gunn, Sr. Art Center had once been an old warehouse that Daniel, Sarah, Uncle James, and a number of other folks had worked to convert into the art center Daniel had envisioned.

The warehouse, once abandoned and nothing but an eyesore, had brand-new windows, a fresh coat of paint, a new roof, and actual flowers planted in front next to the art center's sign. Seeing his little brother's name always sent a wave of emotion through Daniel, but never more so than today, when the art center would be open to the public.

"You did an amazing job here," said Sarah. "No matter what happens, you've done another great thing for this town. Your family would be very proud."

Daniel heard Bobby's laughter off to one side and smiled. Uncle James was currently babysitting as Daniel went over the last few details before the opening that evening.

"Did you get those paintbrushes unboxed?" he said suddenly. "The Yellow Room didn't have any brushes in it."

Sarah, efficient as ever whether she was running a diner or something else, had an answer ready. "I didn't, but let's go do it now."

As Sarah and Daniel walked past Bobby and Uncle James, Sarah shot Daniel's uncle a warm smile. Apparently, the two of them were now "going steady." Daniel teased his uncle

every other day about it, but Uncle James took it good-naturedly.

Seeing the art center made Daniel confident that when Willa came next month for Bobby's fourth birthday party and saw the art center for herself, she'd never want to leave again. And if he could remind her how much he loved her and wanted her to stay ...

Inside the Yellow Room—one wall aptly painted a bright, sunny yellow—Daniel opened a box of brushes and began to place them in containers.

“Looks like they mixed oil brushes with watercolor. You'll want to keep those separate,” said Sarah.

Daniel shot her a grateful smile. “Some artist I am,” he joked. “They all look the same to me.”

As they worked, Sarah kept looking over at Daniel when she thought he wasn't watching.

“What do you keep staring at me for?” he said in exasperation. “Is there something on my face?”

“Nah. And who says I'm looking at you?” Sarah flipped her gray braid over her shoulder and resumed putting brushes in their places.

Daniel harrumphed. Sarah had been edgy and out of sorts since this morning. Had something happened between her and Uncle James? But a few minutes ago, she'd smiled at Uncle James like there was nothing wrong, so that couldn't be it.

Daniel shook his head inwardly. He wasn't stupid enough to pry into this woman's business. If she wanted to tell him, she would. She could keep her own counsel, otherwise.

Although the art center had given Daniel something to focus on, it hadn't eased the ache he felt inside for Willa. Instead, it had only intensified the feeling: every brush, every pot of paint, every pad of paper ordered had made him think of her. Although they texted and sometimes video-phoned for Bobby's sake, they hadn't talked one-on-one in ages.

Daniel wanted to know everything she was doing in New York. He had no idea how her job was going, beyond one text that had mentioned she was tired and going to bed early. Was her job everything she'd hoped for? Had she made new friends since going back? Even worse, had she met someone else already?

The thought of another man kissing Willa made Daniel's blood boil. She was his, dammit, and he wasn't going to give her up without a fight—no matter if this other man was imaginary or not.

Daniel had been so caught up in thoughts of Willa a few days ago that he'd made the impulsive decision to fly to New York with Bobby to see her next week. He needed to make sure she was okay—at least, that was what he told himself. He could use Bobby as an excuse, of course. And he knew Willa would be happy to see the little boy, no matter what happened.

“There y'all are,” said Uncle James. Bobby followed him into the Yellow Room. “Are y'all still messing with supplies? People won't be countin' paintbrushes tonight.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Shows what you know. Besides, everything needs to be put away some time. Might as well be now.”

Bobby found a box of pipe cleaners that Daniel had just opened, and before anyone could stop him, the boy had dumped the box onto the floor. Pipe cleaners rolled about in all directions.

“Bobby, buddy, what are you doing?” said Daniel with a sigh. He crouched down to clean up the mess, when something inside him told him to leave it.

Daniel had always stuck by the rules, had always kept his life orderly and organized. And what had it brought him? Nothing but unhappiness.

“It's a bug!” said Bobby as he handed a green pipe cleaner to Daniel. “A big one.”

Daniel decided to make a bug out of pipe cleaners for Bobby right then, which Bobby loved.

Daniel knew now that a little mess in life didn't hurt anyone. Sometimes, it was just a part of life, and you had to embrace it.

"You've done an amazing job," said Uncle James later that day. He slapped Daniel on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you, son. And I know your parents would be, too."

"Do you want me blubbering like a baby right now?" joked Daniel, even as he surreptitiously dashed a tear from his eye.

"You and me both. When I heard of this scheme of yours, I thought you were insane, but what did I know? You really pulled it off." Uncle James smiled and shook his head. "I know I've been hard on you these past few months, haranguing you about the little lady." He sighed. "I'm sorry she didn't stay, but you'll find someone else. You're a good man, and a good woman will see that."

Daniel decided this wasn't the time to tell his uncle he'd bought a plane ticket to New York, or that he had no intention of finding another woman to replace Willa. She was the woman he would love until his dying day.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Willa smiled as she approached the Robert Gunn, Sr. Art Center, her heart pounding with excitement. Sarah had told Willa all about what Daniel had done, and Willa was in complete awe of his accomplishment as she took in her surroundings.

“Daniel got this idea into his head, and he wouldn’t stop until it was done,” Sarah had said over the phone. “And I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t for you, my dear.”

Willa didn’t deserve such a huge gesture, but it only made her fall further in love with Daniel. He was the most amazing, generous man she’d ever met. She only hoped he’d give her a second chance.

“It’s now or never,” she muttered as she entered the newly refurbished building. The crowd inside was already huge, but it didn’t take long for familiar faces to spot Willa.

“Willa!” DeeDee pushed past a bunch of people and hugged Willa hard. “You’re finally here! I can’t believe it.”

“Me, either.” Willa couldn’t keep herself from looking over DeeDee’s shoulder, but she didn’t see the tall, familiar frame of Daniel.

“I know you’re looking for Daniel, but he hasn’t come downstairs yet. He’s still getting things together.” DeeDee winked at Willa. “You gonna tell him you love him tonight?”

“I’m just hoping he’ll talk to me.”

“Darlin’, he put this entire center together for *you*. Don’t be nervous. He’ll probably fall at your feet from shock when he sees you.”

Willa laughed unsteadily. “You think so?”

“Oh, he’ll do more than that.” DeeDee wiggled her eyebrows, making Willa blush.

Willa talked to more friends, trying not to be rude about looking for Daniel, and Bobby, too. When Daniel still didn’t come downstairs, Willa finally sneaked upstairs to find him herself.

Luck was on her side. As she turned the corner of the hallway, she almost ran straight into Daniel. The look on his face was one Willa would never forget for the rest of her life: shock, hope, confusion. Love. So much love filled his expression that Willa wanted to drag him into the nearest room and have her way with him.

“Willa!” Bobby launched himself at Willa, and she picked the solid little body up and gave him a loud, smacking kiss.

“How you’ve grown! You’re so big! I missed you soooooo much!” She kept kissing him until he protested to get down.

“What are you doing here?” said Daniel. The love that Willa had momentarily seen in his face had disappeared, replaced by a blank mask. Her heart fell at the sight.

“Well, ain’t you a sight for sore eyes?” Sarah came out of one of the rooms and gave Willa a hearty hug. “You two look like you need some catchin’ up. Lemme take the little cowpoke for you.” She bent down to address the boy. “Bobby, let’s go find somethin’ to eat. I think there are chicken nuggets for you, somewhere.”

At the words *chicken nuggets*, Bobby took Sarah’s hand and followed her without a backward glance to Willa.

Willa rolled her eyes with a laugh. “I guess I can’t compete with chicken nuggets,” she said wryly.

When she and Daniel were alone, though, she felt all of the awkwardness of the situation. She’d been so sure that Daniel



would be happy to see her, but she was terrified that she was wrong. He didn't look happy to see her. He just looked confused.

*He doesn't love me anymore. I'm too late. Oh God, I'm an idiot. I should never have come. And now I don't have a job, and I'll have to go back to New York and find another one—*

Willa forced herself to stop the onslaught of thoughts that were turning into a whirlwind. Swallowing hard, she said, "How have you been?"

Daniel stuffed his hands into his jean pockets. "Fine. Busy. You?"

This was worse than Willa could imagine. She wanted to melt into the floor. "You know what? This was a bad idea. I never should have shown up out of the blue like this. I'm sorry that I —"

She turned to go, but Daniel put a hand on her elbow. She stopped, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"Why are you here, Willa?" he said, his voice low.

Her heart pounded in her ears. "Why do you think I'm here? I'm here for *you*. I came back here because—"

Daniel took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Because?"

"Because I'm in love with you!" She covered her mouth, horrified that she'd declared herself like that.

When she turned around, though, Daniel was grinning. And then his arms were around her as he breathed, "Thank God."

He kissed her, his lips demanding and relentless yet infinitely tender. Willa melted. She was home, finally home. She poured all of her love for him into returning that kiss.

"I love you, Willa. God, I love you. I've missed you like crazy. How long are you going to stay?"

Willa laughed. "Forever, if you'll let me."

Daniel stared at her. "Are you serious?"

“You think I’d quit my job, pack my bags, and come here if I wasn’t?”

“You’ll stay here with me and Bobby. You won’t run off again?”

“No, I won’t.” Her expression turned serious. “I love you, and I love Bobby. I want us to be a family like in that terrible picture you drew.”

“Thank God,” Daniel repeated. He hugged her so tightly she almost couldn’t breathe, but she didn’t care. She was home, and the man she loved still loved her. It was better than she could ever have imagined.

Willa inhaled sharply when Daniel went down on one knee and pulled what looked like a pipe cleaner from his pocket. She started laughing when he twisted the pipe cleaner into a ring.

“Willa Markson,” he said, his voice solemn but his eyes dancing, “I love you. You’re the one woman who understands me, the one woman who can put up with me. You’re everything I’ve ever dreamed of. Marry me, and make me the happiest man on earth.”

Willa couldn’t see through the tears, but she nodded. “Yes, yes, yes,” she said as Daniel placed the pipe-cleaner ring on her finger. It fit perfectly, and she’d cherish it for the rest of her life.

As Daniel rose and kissed her, Willa was startled when she heard a wolf-whistle nearby. Turning, she blinked in shock when she saw the people from the crowd from downstairs were currently lined up on the stairs and had apparently watched everything happen.

“Get it, girl!” yelled DeeDee. Someone else wolf-whistled again.

Willa turned scarlet and then started laughing so hard she didn’t know if her tears were from the proposal or from everyone watching it happen.

Daniel just shook his head. “Y’all are a bunch of nosy nellies!” he said.

“Ain’t our fault y’all weren’t paying attention to nothing but yourselves,” said Uncle James.

Bobby ran straight for Willa and Daniel. “Willa, I got chicken nuggets!” he proclaimed.

Willa giggled. “I’m so glad, Bobby. And guess what? I’m staying here with you and your uncle Daniel. He asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

Bobby frowned before saying, “I farted.”

The entire crowd laughed. Daniel scooped up Bobby and ruffled his hair. “Thanks for letting us know, buddy,” he said dryly.

Later that evening, Daniel took Willa to a private nook as the party continued. Willa couldn’t stop smiling the entire evening, she was so happy.

“I forgot to tell you that I want you to be the director here,” Daniel said in a rush. “And since you’re looking for a job ...”

“Seriously?”

“Totally serious.” He cupped her cheek. “I built this place because I knew it was my one last shot at getting you to come back. I thought that if you had a place where you could make art and be around it all day, you’d consider staying for good.”

She heard what Daniel wasn’t saying: he hadn’t had any expectation that she would’ve returned to be with *him*. He’d just wanted her to come back to town. He loved her enough that simply being within a few miles of each other was enough.

Her heart was about to burst with love. “I would love that,” she said, “although I think you should put out a call for applications. Because it should be the most qualified applicant who gets the job.”

“Which would be you.”

She patted his chest. “You don’t need to sweet-talk me. You already got me to agree to marry you.”

Growling, he pulled her close, his hands roving down her back to grab her ass. “And if you don’t stop looking at me like that, I’ll show you exactly how much I love you, right here.”

Willa laughed. “Who says I’d tell you not to? Show me what you got, big guy.”

Not one to refuse a dare, Daniel tossed her over his shoulder and carried her off to the closest room with a door and no window, where he had his wicked way with her and showed her just how much he loved her.

## EPILOGUE

“Oh, you look so pretty, darlin’,” said DeeDee as she adjusted Willa’s train. “Are you nervous?”

“Kind of, but not really. Should I be nervous?”

“No, because you’re about to marry the man you love. Ain’t nothin’ to be nervous about that.”

Willa smiled as she looked at herself in the mirror: she’d never felt more beautiful than she did right now. She’d never been a girly girl, but wearing her wedding dress was something special. She and DeeDee had gone to one shop and had found the perfect gown on the first try. Off-the-shoulder with lace sleeves, it was the most beautiful dress Willa had ever seen.

“You’re as pretty as a picture.” Sarah paused for a moment to take Willa in. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse to wipe her eyes. “I’m such a sucker for a wedding.”

“Don’t cry, or you’ll make me cry,” said Willa, although she had to sniffle and dash a tear away after Sarah bustled off.

The last six months had been a whirlwind, but in the best possible way. Willa had moved back in with Daniel and Bobby, and this time, Daniel’s bedroom was hers now, too. They made love every night, and every time was more amazing than the last. And each morning, Daniel kissed her cheek as he got up to attend to the farm, telling her he loved her and would miss her until his return.

Daniel had agreed to allow other applicants for the art center director’s position, but an independent panel of interviewers

unanimously decided to hire Willa anyway. Daniel had a smug look on his face for a week after the vote.

“It’s just about time,” said DeeDee. She picked up Willa’s bouquet and handed it to her.

Willa took the pipe-cleaner ring Daniel had made that night at the opening—he’d since bought her a real diamond engagement ring—and tucked it into the bouquet of roses. Who would have thought she’d cherish a ring made from a red pipe cleaner? Life never failed to be interesting, and amazing, too.

Willa’s heart started pounding. “Okay, I’m getting nervous now. What if I trip and fall on my face going up the aisle?”

“Not gonna happen. And if you do trip, we’ll all help you up.”

“Thanks so much,” Willa retorted wryly.

When the music started, Willa joined her father in the church’s foyer, taking his arm. When she’d told her father she was staying in Texas *and* marrying a cowboy, he’d never been happier. And then he’d demanded to know who this fellow was, because that cowpoke sure as hell hadn’t asked him for permission to marry his only daughter.

“You look just as beautiful as your mother,” her daddy said now. He kissed her forehead. “You ready, baby?”

“I think so.”

Bobby stood in front of Willa, the groomsmen and bridesmaids going up to the front of the church first. Bobby had been given the very important job of ring bearer, a role he took seriously. That morning, he’d woken up sniffing and sneezing, and Willa had been afraid he’d be too sick to be in the wedding. But Bobby had insisted that he had to fulfill his ring bearer job, no matter how he was feeling.

At four years old, Bobby was growing like a weed, and every day, he amazed his new parents with how smart and funny and sweet he was. It was always an adventure, taking care of a preschooler, but Willa wouldn’t have it any other way. And even better, it prepared her for when she and Daniel would

have their own children, something Willa hoped for in the near future.

When the bride's song started, Willa took hold of her father's arm. She was glad for his support because the moment her gaze landed on Daniel wearing a tuxedo, she would've fallen down from how handsome he looked. He still held his Stetson under his arm and wore cowboy boots—this was Texas, after all—and when he saw her, love radiated from his smile.

Willa barely saw anyone in the crowd as she walked toward Daniel. She had eyes only for the man she adored as she headed toward their future together.

When Willa's father handed her off to Daniel, Daniel whispered to her, "You look beautiful."

"So do you," she whispered back.

"I got new cowboy boots," Bobby whispered.

Daniel's lips twitched, and it was only the pastor starting the ceremony that kept him from laughing.

"The couple has decided to write their own vows," said the pastor with a fond smile.

Daniel cleared his throat after taking out a heavily folded piece of paper. When he'd suggested to Willa that they write their own vows, she'd loved the idea, only to realize that writing vows was harder than it sounded. At this point, Willa had gone over her vows so many times she didn't need to read them.

"Willa," began Daniel, his gaze never wavering from hers, "I promise to love you, to cherish you, and to take care of you and our family for the rest of my life. I also promise not to mind the messes that will happen, or when things get disorganized, or when you decide to make a pillow fort out of cushions that actually belong on the couch."

The crowd laughed, and Willa rolled her eyes even as she laughed.

"I promise to be the best husband and father I can be," continued Daniel, "and I can't wait to grow old with you."

You're the woman of my dreams, and I'll spend every waking moment aiming to make you happy."

"Me, too," said Bobby, not to be left out.

Willa wished she could kiss Daniel then and there. Wiping away a few stray tears, she said, "When I first met you, Daniel Aaron Gunn, I thought you were stubborn, cantankerous, and a total pain." More laughter, and Willa knew right then how much Daniel loved her when he laughed, too.

"But I realized that I was wrong. I saw you embrace fatherhood, and I saw how patient you were with Bobby. I saw a man who had a heart of gold, and I'm so grateful that heart is mine now. My heart has been yours since the first moment we met, even though I didn't know it. You're my home, and home is where the heart is. And Daniel, you're my heart—forever and always."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Uncle James beaming. The entire crowd seemed to sigh collectively. When the pastor pronounced them husband and wife, Daniel kissed Willa for so long that there was wolf-whistling from someone in the church. Bobby yelled, "Ewwww!" so loudly that everyone laughed.

Blushing but happier than ever, Willa took Daniel's hand as they headed down the aisle with Bobby clinging to Daniel's free hand.

"I love you, Mrs. Gunn," said Daniel outside on the church steps while Bobby jumped up and down and cheered.

Willa beamed up at him. "I love you more, Mr. Gunn. And we're going to live happily ever after."



# END OF HOME WITH THE COWBOY

Do you love sexy cowboys? Please keep reading for an exciting excerpt from *Cowboy's Surprise Twins* and *Cowboy's Doorstep Baby*.

THANK YOU!

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## MAKE AN AUTHOR'S DAY

There's nothing better than reading great reviews from readers like yourself, but there's more to it than simply putting a smile on my face. As an independent author, I don't have the financial might of a big NYC publishing house or the clout to get in Oprah's book club. What I do have, as my not-so-secret weapon is you, my awesome readers!

If you enjoyed this book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a quick review. Simply [TAP HERE](#) or just leave a review when prompted by Amazon at the end of this book. Alternatively, head over to the product page for this book on Amazon and leave a review there—look for the WRITE A CUSTOMER REVIEW link.

No matter the length (short is fine!), your review will help this series get the exposure it needs to grow and make it into the hands of other awesome readers. Plus, reading your kind reviews is often the highlight of my day, so please be sure to let me know what you loved most about this book.

# ABOUT MARY SUE JACKSON

Mary Sue Jackson is the romance pen name created for all those cowboy dreamers! This Montana-based cowgirl is a rancher, and knows what hard work means. But despite being up at dawn and working past dusk, she still finds time for what she really loves... romance! With so many hours spent alone, riding across the seemingly never-ending expanse of grasslands, she has plenty of time to dream of love and the romantic tales of ranch life.

When Mary Sue's not out on the grasslands dreaming up her next story, she's most often spending time with her own personal hunky rancher, her husband. One of Mary Sue's favorite activities is to ride the ranch with her husband in the evening and hold his hand as they watch the sun go down over the prairie.

To learn more about Mary Sue you can check out all her books on social media and her website: [www.leslienorthbooks.com/mary-sue-jackson](http://www.leslienorthbooks.com/mary-sue-jackson).

You can find her hanging out on:



## ABOUT LESLIE

Leslie North is the USA Today Bestselling pen name for a critically-acclaimed author of women's contemporary romance and fiction. The anonymity gives her the perfect opportunity to paint with her full artistic palette, especially in the romance and erotic fantasy genres.

Find your next Leslie North book visit [LeslieNorthBooks.com](http://LeslieNorthBooks.com) or choose:

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PS: Want sneak peeks, giveaways, ARC offers, fun extras and plenty of pictures of bad boys? Join my Facebook group, [Leslie's Lovelies!](#)





Leslie North book cover

## **BLURB**

**This cowboy needs an angel. And he may have just found one...**

Cowboy Dean Walters is no stranger to hard work. But when he takes full custody of his infant twins, he has to admit, even he can't raise them alone. Hiring a nanny seems like a smart move. But hiring a beautiful nanny that makes his blood run hot proves to be problematic, especially as she's only in this for the short term. Amira Davis may be a godsend for Dean and his new family, but she's causing this lonely cowboy a special kind of misery, as he slowly realizes he wants something more...

Amira has one rule... She fixes families, but she doesn't become part of them. Until she meets Dean. This sexy single dad may just be the most captivating man she's ever met, and his family definitely needs her help. She's committed to leave in two months, and a passionate romance isn't part of her plans. But for the first time in her life Amira is tempted to break her number one rule. The question is, will it end up breaking her heart as well....

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## EXCERPT

### Chapter One

There was a time when Dean had taken quiet for granted. It hadn't been something to cherish or chase, but a forgone conclusion. He would spend large parts of his day, the parts not dedicated to running his fly-fishing business, in solitude. The sounds of the river hurrying busily beside his little cabin, the birds in the trees, and the unseen animals rummaging in the woods had been the soundtrack of his life.

He had never realized how much he loved the quiet interrupted only by those little sounds, but he supposed that was how it went with people. So often, they didn't realize what they had until they didn't have it anymore. But the blissfulness of peace and quiet was not something Dean was going to take for granted ever again. Not now that he knew just how *noisy* life could be when you were caring for twin babies by yourself. He had been the sole parent to his three-month-old twins for only two weeks now, but calm and quiet already felt like a distant memory.

As if to punctuate the point, Caitlyn, balanced on his hip, let out a warning whimper. Her brother, Calek, demanded absolute silence to sleep, but Caitlyn was different. The best way to get her to nod off and stay that way was to talk to her. Constantly. Even taking a break for a long breath was a precarious situation with this one.

"I know, I've gotcha, baby girl," he murmured, hefting her higher up on her hip and bouncing her lightly. "You're the boss."

Francis Howard, the man he was trying to hold a phone conversation with while soothing the beast that was his sleep-deprived child, cleared his throat pointedly. "Well, now, I didn't realize we were at that point in our friendship, Dean. I'm going to have to let that one sit with me for a bit."

"Sorry, man," Dean said with a groan and an apologetic laugh. "That wasn't meant for you. I'm working with a situation

here.”

Francis chuckled into the phone. “Understood. But what the hell is going on, man? Is that a *baby* I hear? Are you babysitting for your sister or something?”

While technically, Dean worked for Francis—on a contract basis, through Dean’s fly-fishing business whenever the high-powered businessman needed a break and carved out a week for a vacation—the two of them had made enough conversation over enough fishing trips that they knew some basics about each other. Including the fact that Dean had a sister with three kids. Though he must not have shared enough info for Francis to realize that his two nieces and nephew weren’t babies anymore. If he’d said it, Francis would have remembered. The construction magnate had a mind like a steel trap. He forgot *nothing*.

Dean groaned. “Don’t I wish. The *youngest* of my sister’s kids is six years old—she’s potty trained, old enough to go down for a nap by herself, and capable of opening her mouth and actually *telling* me what she needs instead of crying. No, the baby you’re hearing isn’t my niece. It’s my daughter.”

Francis let out a slow whistle. “You weren’t kidding when you said you had a situation. Since when do you have a daughter?”

“Since five days ago—and you don’t know the half of it. Literally. I don’t just have a daughter, I have a son, too. Twins. Three months old.”

“And their mama?”

“One night stand from last year,” Dean admitted, feeling a little embarrassed. “You know how they say no form of birth control is one hundred percent effective? Well... Anyway, first I heard of it was two weeks ago, when social services called to say that she was giving up her parental rights. I could take the kids myself, or they’d go into foster care.”

“So you took them yourself,” Francis finished. “Of course you did. You’re a good man, Dean Walters.”

“Well, right now, I’m a sleep-deprived man,” Dean retorted. “I don’t think I’ve slept more than an hour at a stretch since they

arrived.”

“Sounds to me like you need help.”

“Don’t I know it.” With the babies and with so much more. It wasn’t like things had exactly been going smooth for him even *before* the babies arrived. But that was something he wouldn’t get into with Francis. Their relationship was friendly, sure, but that wasn’t quite the same as being actual friends. He didn’t want the man he’d come to respect and admire through their fishing expeditions to realize what a screw up he really was. “I hired a nanny—found her online. She’s coming today. Hopefully, she’ll be able to get things running smoothly.” Dean was pinning every hope he had on that, actually, because he wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take.

“Speaking of which,” he added, “it looks like she’s actually coming up the road right now. I’m going to have to let you go.”

Francis made some vaguely supportive comments before hanging up. Dean attempted to slide his phone into his back pocket without upsetting his hold on his Caitlyn. After five days, he still felt like he was constantly on the verge of dropping his babies, which was not the first impression he wanted to make on the new nanny. There would be plenty of time for him to prove his incompetence to her as the days and weeks wore on. No reason to make that case withing the first five minutes of knowing her.

The car continued its bumpy progress down the rough gravel road leading to his cabin, finally pulling to a stop a few feet in front of where Dean stood. Just the one trip had kicked up enough dust to lightly coat the bottom half of the car, and Dean had a moment to hope that the woman inside of it wouldn’t be too thrown off by the less than glamorous living standard he had out here. When the newly arrived nanny opened her door and stepped out of her car, his first thought was that ranch life must be a new thing for her. His second thought was that she was almost alarmingly attractive. She had dark hair tucked behind her ears and wide, bright blue eyes. Her slim body looked achingly good in a pair of dark jeans and a black shirt. The clothing was simple but had the look of

something fashionable to Dean's admittedly untrained eye. Her tennis shoes were such a bright white he doubted she'd ever worn them outside before. She was definitely not dressed for spending time in a remote cabin in the woods.

"Hi!" She called softly, waving a delicate hand and smiling wide as she made her way towards Dean and Caitlyn. "I'm Amira Davis. You must be Dean. It's so good to meet you."

Dean returned her smile and hefted Caitlyn up a little higher on his hip. "Hi, Amira, I'm glad to make your acquaintance, and grateful that you could take the job so quickly. I know this must be quite a change from Massachusetts."

She frowned a little, looking confused. "Do you mean Maryland? I'm actually based in the DC area."

*Did* he mean Maryland? He thought her profile had mentioned that her last job was in Massachusetts...but he tended to get East Coast states mixed up. Not to mention, he'd been frantically searching through profiles, trying to find someone qualified who was available right away. Maybe he'd gotten her profile mixed up with someone else's.

Oh well, when in doubt, turn on the charm. It usually worked to smooth things over, and in his service-oriented business, he'd learned that a smile and a self-deprecating joke could mean the difference between an angry client and an appeased one.

"There's a difference?" he joked, playing up his Colorado twang. "When I look that way from out here, all I see is one big coastal spread of confusion." He winked, and she laughed, her whole face lighting up. Dean's stomach did an involuntary flipflop when he saw that. She really was beautiful.

"Fair enough," she agreed. "I can admit, the world looks different from out here. I was glad for an excuse to come out this way, actually. I've got a friend who lives close by. I'm planning on taking some time to see her while I'm here, if that's alright."

"Sure," Dean nodded. "Don't see why not. I'm just glad you made it. Have any trouble finding the place?"

Before answering, her eyes moved over his shoulder to the house directly behind him. He tried seeing it through her eyes. As a nanny in DC, she was probably used to some pretty fancy places. His cabin...wasn't fancy. To say the least. For a bachelor, it had been perfectly comfortable, if a little spare. What more did he need than a bedroom, a decent-size living room, some basic kitchen facilities and a small bathroom? But throw in two babies, and things got a little...cramped.

“No,” she finally said, fixing a smile on her face again. “I wouldn't say I had trouble. I did go to the main house before finding this one. There was a nice man there and he told me where to go.”

Dean shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He knew it would make more sense to move up to the big house. It was there for him to live in. But it didn't feel like it was truly his yet. It certainly wasn't supposed to be. The main house had been his father's domain—with Dean's older brother, Jackson, as the heir apparent. No one could have guessed that they'd lose both Jackson and Dad in the span of just a few years. Now Dean was the one left to shoulder all the responsibilities they had left behind. He'd stepped up to take over the ranch, but moving into the main house...that had been a bridge too far.

He turned his attention back to her, opening his mouth to invite her inside. When he got a look her face, though, he stopped. Her formerly easy, smiling expression was gone. In its place was a mask of fear as she stared in horror at a spot on the ground. Dean followed her gaze and chuckled.

“He's not going to hurt you, and that's a promise.” He watched the small snake make its way over the bed of pine needles. Not looking reassured, Amira moved closer to him and Caitlyn.

“Oh yeah? How can you be so sure? Do you read snakes' minds?”

He laughed again and Caitlyn stirred in his arms. “Nope, not that I'm aware of. But I have lived on this ranch all my life. I know a garden snake when I see one. That little guy isn't interested in you. He just wants to mosey on his way.”

She looked on the verge of believing him, but before she could relax, a toad landed squarely on the toe of her pristine white sneaker. It was apparently the last straw for Amira's composure. She gasped and jumped, catching her foot on a tree root hardly visible above ground. Her arms pinwheeled uselessly at her sides, and she started to go down.

Dean just reacted. Keeping a strong hold on Caitlyn with one arm, the other shot out, catching Amira around the waist before she could land in the dirt next to the offending toad. He watched it hop off towards the nearby river, likely in search of water, shade, and slightly less commotion. Then his gaze moved back to Amira, whom he held firmly against his body. She felt good there—better than she had any right to. He might have forgotten himself and said something to that effect if not for Caitlyn's vocal indignation about the abrupt movement.

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Mary Sue Jackson book cover

## BLURB

*Romance is cookin' for this sexy cowboy and his feisty new chef...*

Sam Carden's got a lot on his plate, with plans to expand his cowboy camp. But things get more complicated when an old flame shows up with their infant daughter, Molly, and hands her off—permanently.

Witnessing this is Arielle Rose, Sam's gorgeous new cook. When Sam's old cook informs him he's recovered from an injury and can return to work again, Sam decides what he really needs is a nanny. Arielle agrees on one condition: she needs time to hone her recipes for a big upcoming competition.

Arielle is laser-focused on her job as a chef, so it's a bit distracting to have to watch little Molly while she's preparing for her competition. But the bigger distraction is Sam, who's just about the sexiest man she's ever met. The stress of preparing for the contest is definitely taking a toll. So, when Sam asks her to stay on as Molly's nanny, she's less than thrilled. No matter how attractive she finds Sam or how much she loves being around Molly...

Arielle knows she has to follow her dream...but what if it leads away from the family she's falling in love with?

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## EXCERPT

### Chapter One

“We’ve got a lot riding on these next few rounds of camps. Losing Chef Calvin couldn’t have come at a worse time.” The ever-present vise around Sam Carden’s temples tightened as he spoke the words. It felt like every aspect of the ranch functioned like the parts of a precision watch; if one got knocked out of whack, then it threw everything else out of alignment

“Sweetie, I know,” Anne answered. “I’m going to miss his cooking. I think all of our campers will. But his back has been hassling him for years—he needs to get it taken care of once and for all. When does the new girl start?”

“Today.” He peered at his phone. “Any minute now, actually. Let’s see if she’s on time.”

Anne placed a stack of pancakes on the plate in front of him. “What’s her name?”

The smell of freshly cooked pancakes wafted up from the plate in front of him and Sam was momentarily distracted from his worries. Anne cooked the fluffiest and most delicious pancakes his tastebuds had ever encountered. She wasn’t a blood relative, but she was the closest thing he had to family after taking care of him for so long. With their easy way around each other, people sometimes mistook them for mother and son, even though they didn’t look at all similar. Anne with her short, stout figure and sweet round face a contrast to Sam’s height and sharp angles. She wasn’t exactly a mother figure to him; she was more of a combination of favorite aunt and fairy godmother. But the affection and respect between them wasn’t a fairy tale.

“Brielle, I think? Something like that. Honestly, I’ve been so busy that I can’t remember. Otherwise I never would’ve hired her sight unseen. Gotta admit, I’m a little worried.”

“Well, being referred by a friend has to help a little, right?”

“Eh.” Sam waved his hand back and forth. “Nancy is friend-ish. We went to high school together. But sure, it helps that they worked together a while back.”

He wasn't about to admit it to Anne, but the truth was he'd liked the sound of the woman's voice during their phone interview. Of course, her resume was stellar, but he'd learned the hard way that words on a sheet of paper only went so far. He needed to feel a connection with the *person*. She'd had a warmth to her tone, and he could almost hear her smiling when she talked about her love of cooking. He'd had a gut feeling when he'd extended the offer to her, but with so much riding on the season ahead he was feeling less way confident about his decision.

“It's not like you have a lot of options this late,” Anne pointed out pragmatically, then paused before saying, “Why is she available anyway?”

“She's got some deal going on with a fancy chef in Vail at the end of the summer. Chef... Crap, what was that guy's name?” The name had gone in one ear and out the other during their conversation. “...Welsh? She said she wants to use her downtime here to work on her recipes, since she doesn't have access to a professional kitchen at home.”

Anne's eyebrows shot up as she flipped a pancake. “Chef Welsh, wow. He's the guy on that show.”

“Don't know him.” Sam shrugged as he polished off the last bite, then dragged his finger across the plate to get the last traces of butter and syrup. “That fancy crap isn't my thing.”

“Hey,” Anne chided. “Watch your mouth, mister. You can't be talking like that once the kids show up, so don't get into the habit.”

“You know I won't.” He lobbed his winning smile at her, the one that always coaxed a smile back from her.

“Well, that's the last of 'em,” Anne said as she placed a plate of pancakes on the table opposite Sam and sat down. “Waste not, want not,” she said with a wink and dug in. “Now, what's the latest from Wallace?”

Sam sighed. She was talking about Wallace Wagner, the man who held the keys to his future. Sam had been in talks with Wallace since the town's annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks celebration, nearly a year ago.

In the time since then, he had busted his ass to impress him enough to get the reclusive investor to agree to consider helping him. After Sam had outlined his growth plan for the Cowboy Camp attached to the Carden Ranch, Wallace agreed to a tentative deal to fund the expansion. If things went according to Sam's projections, Wallace was convinced they could franchise Sam's Cowboy Camp model and turn the project into a lifelong steady revenue stream for both of them.

In the short term, the fact was Sam desperately needed the infusion of cash that would come from the partnership. Ranch upkeep was expensive enough, but the spring fires had taken a hefty toll, and he was up to his eyeballs in debt from the rebuilding.

"Everything is riding on this season. Wallace set up automated surveys for all of the campers' parents, which will track every bit of their experience, from signing up online to saying goodbye. The scrutiny is going to kill me."

"Stop. You're ready," Anne said as she shoveled the final forkful of pancakes into her mouth. They were all used to eating fast, especially as the clock ticked down to opening day.

Anne pushed away from the table and took both of their plates to the sink. "I have a good feeling about everything, honey. Well, everything but the stack of linens waiting for me."

"When I sign that deal with Wallace, the first thing I'm doing is setting up a laundry service, so you don't have to worry about it anymore."

"Be still my heart," she replied, holding her hand to her chest and closing her eyes. Anne walked over and gave Sam a kiss on the top of the head. "You're too good to me."

"No such thing."

Left alone in the kitchen, Sam pulled out his phone to look at his to-do list. Endless, as always. Anne was too busy with the

laundry and housekeeping to help the new cook get acquainted with the kitchen layout, which meant it was up to him to give her the tour. As if he knew where everything was!

Chef Calvin had been with him since his grandfather ran the ranch, and he knew his way around the kitchen with his eyes closed. It had always been a relief knowing that the kitchen was one area he didn't have to worry about, but now that Calvin was gone, Sam had a feeling he was going to get roped into meal debacles more than he wanted.

Knowing the deal with Wallace was hanging in the balance, he needed seamless work from everyone on staff. He didn't have the time or inclination to worry about if they should have macaroni Mondays or pizza Fridays—not when he had a business to run. And more importantly, to *grow*.

Sam heard wheels crunching on gravel and checked his phone again. Eight fifty. She was early. Sam walked to the window, spotted a sporty two-seater Nissan, and was shocked when the driver got out.

His heart sank. She was the most un-chef-like chef he'd ever seen. Not that he'd met many, but still, he knew enough to understand that high heels, skin-tight jeans, and sparkly pink tank tops weren't usually part of the package.

Sam wasn't one to make snap-judgements, but he immediately knew that it wasn't going to work out. Cooking for the kids attending Cowboy Camp was hard, dirty work, and someone who looked like *that* didn't seem likely to roll up her sleeves and put some elbow grease into getting things done.

This was a disaster.

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